NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

Two bishops dialogue with Catholic peace activists

Tony Magliano | Nov. 25, 2013 Making a Difference

During the U.S. Catholic bishops' Nov. 11-14 meeting in Baltimore, two bishops took time to share a simple supper -- soup and bread -- and dialogue with about 20 Catholic social justice and peace activists, including me.

On the evening of Nov. 12, several blocks away from the Waterfront Marriott Hotel, where the bishops were meeting, Archbishop Joseph Tobin of Indianapolis and Bishop John Michael Botean, head of the Romanian Catholic Eparchy (diocese) of St. George in Canton, Ohio, sat down with us to talk about war-making, peacemaking, poverty and military chaplains in light of the teachings of the compassionate, nonviolent Jesus.

In the basement of historic St. Vincent de Paul Catholic Church, Martha Hennessy, a granddaughter of Dorothy Day, said, "Based on my understanding of my grandmother's life, I would conclude that priests should not serve in the military, as one cannot serve Christ and the chain of command at the same time. Part of a chaplain's job is to make soldiers feel OK about doing their job, which is to kill, which Christ said we can't do."

Hennessy said Dorothy Day would not have approved of the earlier bishops' dinner [1] hosted by the Archdiocese for the Military Services, which saw military recruiters lobbying the bishops to send more chaplains.

She said she thought her grandmother would have said the bishops are being complicit with the permanent war economy.

Bishop Botean, who during the Iraq war courageously and prophetically wrote that the war was an "objectively grave evil, a matter of mortal sin," said that unfortunately, the culture has more of an influence on the church than the Gospel does.

"It takes a lot of vision to see the simple message of Jesus in the Gospel," he added.

"Our 'yes' to the Gospel has gotten weaker because other interests have made their way into church thinking, causing a fog around the Gospel," he said. "Since Christianity's legalization by the Roman emperor Constantine, church and state are largely seen as one." And sadly, the church has been defending empires ever since, "accepting homicidal violence," he added.

"We need your prayers and witness," Bishop Botean said. "If the people lead, the leaders will follow."

Archbishop Tobin shared an inspiring story told by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu during a speech in Indianapolis.

Tutu had said that when the Dutch came to South Africa, the Dutch had bibles and the South Africans had the land. The Dutch asked the South Africans to close their eyes and pray, but when the South Africans opened their eyes, the Dutch had the land and the South Africans had the bibles.

But Tutu had said that was the Dutch's big mistake, to give oppressed people the word of God: The word of God

teaches that all people have God-given worth and dignity and that God desires our liberation from all oppression.

Archbishop Tobin told the peacemakers gathered in Baltimore that the most powerful word spoken to injustice is "No!"

We asked Archbishop Tobin and Bishop Botean why the bishops during their annual meetings were not praying and talking about how faithful or unfaithful of a witness they were giving, in light of our highly militaristic and unjust economy, to the nonviolent Jesus, who always sided with the poor and oppressed.

They said they weren't sure and that they weren't sure how to encourage this radical dialogue to happen. But they said they would try.

Words of hope from two humble bishops earnestly striving to challenge America's war machine and system of economic injustice.

[Tony Magliano is an internationally syndicated social justice and peace columnist. He is available to speak at diocesan or parish gatherings about Catholic social teaching. His keynote address, "Advancing the Kingdom of God in the 21st Century," has been well received by diocesan gatherings from Salt Lake City to Baltimore. Tony can be reached at tmag@zoominternet.net [2].]

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