

Jesuits made a mistake in letting John Dear go

Joe Ferullo | Jan. 10, 2014 NCR Today

You meet John Dear and you never forget it. He doesn't grab you by the collar and preach nonviolence, he does not berate or insist -- he just is. Calm, grounded, funny, intelligent, he is one of the best walking advertisements for the Catholic church living today.

Until now. [The Jesuits have decided there is no room for John anymore](#) [1], he doesn't fit the business model they've laid out in their five-year plan: They need Jesuits who can teach in their high schools and colleges, not Jesuits who can teach by speaking truth to power and getting hauled off to jail for the sake of social justice.

I last saw John a few winters ago in Santa Fe, N.M. -- he was at a bookstore downtown, talking about his latest writings, *Put Down Your Sword: Answering the Gospel Call to Creative Nonviolence*. We had started an email relationship a year or two before, when I began writing for NCR Today -- we had met in Los Angeles and now I was on his home turf.

After the talk, we went to dinner across the street in one of those warm, brightly colored restaurants that defines Santa Fe -- my wife was there, my oldest daughter, and about four of John's friends from the bookstore. They were a group of happy outliers, swimming against the tide of society, culture, church and authority. John had just gotten out from his latest stint in jail for protesting at one of New Mexico's many military installations.

But I mean it when I said he was happy about all of this. He spent half the night making us laugh with stories of his encounters with the justice system, from cops to prosecutors to politicians. The other half of the night, he asked my teenage daughter questions about her favorite classes and her thoughts on life, peace and human nature. He treated her like the smart young adult she thought of herself as -- and she's never forgotten it.

In short, John was a picture-perfect priest: pastoral and caring about a young person at the table, while filled with humor and passion about the choices he and his friends had made about how to live out the Gospel in their lives.

I don't mean to talk about John in the past tense, as if he were gone; this sounds more than a bit like a eulogy, but he is very much alive and engaged. Sorry, John -- no graveside salute intended. The eulogy, if there must be one, is for the Jesuit higher-ups who could find no value in him and his gifts.

It's a decision that comes at a puzzling time. For decades, the Jesuits, especially here in the U.S., have quietly kept the candle of social justice lighted in a church that seemed to place those issues on the furthest back-burner they could find. But now, with fellow Jesuit Francis at St. Peter's -- and with inequality a rising global concern -- these parts of the Gospel vision are once again coming into sharp focus. Why choose this moment to hand John a firm handshake and a not-so-gentle shove out the door?

Maybe Francis will intervene -- maybe he'll place a call to his American colleagues and tell them to take one extra look at their ledgers, see if they couldn't shake loose some spare change to hold on to John Dear -- a voice in the wilderness that needs to be heard.

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