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Taking peacemaking seriously - one priest's story

by Tony Magliano

Making a Difference

Working for peace can be dangerous. In some parts of the world, promoting the nonviolent teachings of Jesus can get you killed. But in the United States, usually the worst that will happen is that a Christian peacemaker will get verbally beat up.

As an honorably discharged conscientious objector from the U.S. Army and a longtime social justice and peace columnist, I have been verbally assaulted by fellow Catholics many times. But the nastiness I've encountered is little compared to what veteran peace activist Fr. John Dear has suffered, especially at the hands of his own religious order -- the Society of Jesus.

Dear, author of numerous books on Gospel-based peacemaking and an international speaker on Christian nonviolence, has done jail time for peaceful civil disobedience at various U.S. military and nuclear weapons facilities.

But throughout his 32 years as a Jesuit, instead of receiving the full support from his superiors for his prophetic ministry, Dear told me that nearly every one of them -- more than 30 -- have tried hard to stop his work for peace.

"With all the big money the Jesuits receive from Catholics who work for the military and weapons manufacturing corporations, as well as the financial rewards that come from ROTC programs at Jesuit colleges, the Society of Jesus in the U.S. has no interest in challenging America's war machine," he said.

"And unfortunately," Dear added, "Nearly every U.S. Catholic bishop continues to remain silent in the face of U.S. militarism." He said, "The bishops display little to no interest in promoting the nonviolent teachings of Jesus."

Dear said three years ago, Archbishop Michael Sheehan of Santa Fe, N.M., removed Dear's priestly faculties because the archbishop objected to his prayer vigils for peace at the Los Alamos National Laboratory, the birthplace of nuclear weapons.

According to Dear, the archbishop had received many complaints regarding his efforts for peace from Catholics who work at the nuclear weapons laboratory.

Dear said with all of this intense pressure, along with the order from his Jesuit provincial to return to Baltimore and completely stop his justice and peace ministry, that it was now best to leave the Society of Jesus.

He is praying that Pope Francis will write an encyclical on peace, nonviolence and the abolition of the "just war theory."

In such an encyclical, Dear hopes the pope would insist that Catholics, and all followers of Jesus, must practice Gospel nonviolence themselves and must thus avoid war and war preparation -- no exceptions.

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I second that hope!

And I further hope that bishops' conferences -- especially the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops -- Catholic universities, colleges and parishes will seriously and respectfully begin a sustained and prayerful study, discussion and debate regarding Gospel nonviolence as compared to Christian participation in war, war preparation, the arms trade and military spending. There is no moral room for silent acceptance here.

I agree with Dear that the teachings and example of the nonviolent Jesus make it crystal clear that his followers must oppose all war and war preparation of any kind. That's the way the first Christians saw it for 300 years. And that's exactly what today's Christians need to rediscover.

In our war-torn world with weapons of mass destruction, we must change course. For in the words of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., "the choice today is no longer between violence and nonviolence. It is either nonviolence or nonexistence."

[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.]

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