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

Roy Bourgeois' mission of peace

John Dear | Aug. 14, 2007 On the Road to Peace

Last weekend, 125 of us made the annual pilgrimage of repentance up into the mountains of Los Alamos, N.M., birthplace of the bomb, to remember Hiroshima. For the third year in a row, we put on sackcloth and sat in ashes to repent of the sin of war and nuclear weapons in a spirit of prayer and creative nonviolence. A monsoon downpour soaked the mountaintop, but just as we began, the rain stopped and the sun came out. Afterwards, our featured speaker, Fr. Roy Bourgeois, founder of the campaign to close the "School of the Americas," urged us to carry on our witness for peace -- that one day Los Alamos will be disarmed.

It was a blessing to have Roy with us. One of the leading voices for peace in the nation, and one of the best organizers as well, he grew up in a small town outside New Orleans, joined the military, fought in Vietnam, received the Purple Heart, befriended a wise missionary, and returned home to begin a new journey of peace. He entered Maryknoll, was sent to Bolivia, and served for years in a barrio. Later, he worked in El Salvador and Central America. Back home, he made "Gods of Metal," the groundbreaking video about nuclear weapons which was nominated for an Academy award. His amazing journey has been chronicled in the fine biography, *Disturbing the Peace* (Orbis Books).

In the late 1980s, he and two friends climbed a tree outside the barracks of the School of the Americas in Fort Benning, Ga., where hundreds of Salvadoran soldiers were being trained. That night, after the lights went out, Roy turned a tape player on and broadcast the last sermon of Archbishop Oscar Romero, calling upon El Salvador's soldiers to "stop the repression, stop the killing, and disobey orders to kill." Roy was arrested and spent considerable time in prison for that act. Altogether, he has spent over four and a half years of his life behind bars.

In 1990, he invited me and a handful of others to join him in a fast outside the gates of the SOA, which now has been renamed the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation. I wasn't able to make it because of my studies at the Jesuit School of the Theology, but 15 others did, including our friend Kathy Kelly. So began the "School of the Americas Watch." After their 35 day fast, they returned on the first anniversary of the massacre of the six Jesuits and the two women. Since then, every year, hundreds, then thousands, have joined the vigil. Last year, some 22,000 of us kept vigil. Processing with 10,000 young people every year at the SOA certainly makes this the most hopeful, exciting movement in the country. Last month, Congress came just a few votes shy of closing the SOA. "Our hope is strong," Roy told us.

In recent years, Roy and his colleagues have traveled throughout Latin America and convinced four governments to withdraw their troops from the SOA -- Uruguay, ArgeTtina, Venezuela, and Costa Rica. In July,

Roy traveled to Iran on a fact-finding mission to learn more about that nation and Islam.

Listen to a podcast interview with Fr. Roy Bourgeois on NCRcafe.org: A journey to recapture hope [1].

Roy embodies the Gospel mission of peacemaking, so it was a blessing to host him in my hermitage on the mesa, to sit up late with him, looking at the stars, sharing our stories, and plotting the work of peace.

"It's important that we keep the memory of those who died at Hiroshima and Nagasaki alive, to help make sure that it never happens again," Roy told us at Los Alamos. "Since the end of the Second World War, we have spent over $7 trillion on nuclear weapons. Imagine," he continued, "what that money could do for the world's poor in terms of countless new homes, hospitals, medicine, food, schools and jobs! Every dollar we spend on nuclear weapons and weapons for war in Iraq and elsewhere is 'a theft from our sisters and brothers who are hungry.' "

"We have more nuclear weapons than ever before," Roy continued, "and we have never felt less secure, less safe."

"Bush and Cheney tell us to put our trust in them, in these weapons. Each day, however, I read Psalm 33," Roy said. "There the psalmist explains our situation. 'Rulers are not saved by their weapons. They worship false gods.' Our leaders worship false gods which can only bring death. We have to say no to these false gods of death."

"Our greatest enemy is ignorance. We as a people know so little about our foreign policy, about these wars, about other cultures and histories and religions. Those who declare the wars do not fight them. They send our young people and minorities off to kill and be killed. But we are not made for war."

In the slums of Bolivia the poor became his teachers, Roy told us. "The world's poor can help us breakdown our ignorance about our country and its policies and wars."

"We can't leave our future in the hands of our government leaders," Roy concluded. "We have to take responsibility for our future and our country. We have to go to other nations, listen and learn from them, and discover what we can do to make peace. 'All of us can do something for peace,'" Roy said, quoting Romero.

" 'Let those who have a voice, speak out for peace and justice,' Romero said just before he was killed," Roy continued. "That's where we come in. We have a voice. We can speak out. We need to keep on going, not lose our joy, not let despair or anger consume us, and arm ourselves with love and gentleness. We need to hold on to hope, stay in touch with nature, read and study, take time for solitude and prayer -- and speak out for those who can't speak, saying, 'Stop the wars, stop the killings, close the SOA, bring the troops home, and dismantle these weapons."

Roy Bourgeois inspired us as we sat in ashes and prayed over our nation's insane rush to nuclear annihilation.

Like Roy, we intend to keep at it, to keep walking the road to peace. In fact, we're already planning next year's event. We plan to make the connection between the death penalty and these weapons that put us all on death row, and our special guest at Los Alamos will be none other than Sr. Helen Prejean. Mark your calendars.

John Dear is featured in a new DVD, "The Narrow Path," available from **www.sandamianofoundation.org [2]**, and his new book, *Transfiguration*, (Doubleday) is available online or from your local bookstore. He expects to stand trial for his antiwar protest on Sept. 6 in Albuquerque, N.M. For information, see: **www.johndear.org[3]**

Source URL (retrieved on *09/02/2015 - 11:19*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/road-peace/roy-bourgeois-mission-peace

Links:
[1] http://ncrcafe.org/node/621
[2] http://www.sandamianofoundation.org
[3] http://www.johndear.org