

A visit to the Abbey of Gethsemani

John Dear | Nov. 6, 2007 | On the Road to Peace

This fall has been a whirlwind. For starters, there hangs over my head, my sentencing for last year's visit to Sen. Domenici's office. Punishment postponed again -- this time so the judge can peruse the FBI's dossier of my anti-war history (and thereby formulate a stiffer sentence, sometime next month.)

Meantime I've taken to the road: Tucson, Chicago, Iowa, Notre Dame, New York, Syracuse. And in the weeks ahead: Los Angeles, Florida, Canada, and the protest against the School of Americas in Columbus, Ga. Which is to say, once on the narrow path, it makes sense to stay the course, to keep on speaking out, taking a stand, crossing the line, come what may, on behalf of Gospel nonviolence.

These events seemed fruitful as far as these things can be judged. I encountered all manner of sincere folks and honest discourse. At Louisville's Spalding University there was one discussion in particular. There I participated in a day-long conference on violence. During a panel discussion, one professor confessed, "I love violent movies." "I'm addicted to TV's 'Law and Order,'" added another. "I watch as much brutal sports as I can," said a third.

And all agreed. Scarcely could they imagine a world without violence -- let alone life without violent entertainment. "What would we do without it?" they pondered. "How would we entertain ourselves, how would we get through the day?" Given violence's glib pervasiveness, alas, the question rings sincere.

Only later, driving toward the Abbey of Gethsemani, the Trappist monastery some 50 miles outside Louisville, did the answer appear. Meditation, prayer, enjoying being with the God of peace, and the fruit of communal hospitality, loving service and nonviolent resistance -- here, I thought, was the answer my puzzled colleagues looked for.

The answer was evoked by the Kentucky knobs and the approaching destiny. The Abbey of Gethsemani has graciously received me once or twice a year for nearly 20 years now. And the shock never fades. The monks persist, like the turning of the seasons. There they are, day in, day out, every day attending to their offices, singing the psalms, living in sacred silence.

The contrast amazes me. They rarely leave. I've travel the world, wherever I'm invited. When I return to the monastery, the monks are still there, sitting like Buddha, faithful to the life of prayer. They pray in community for hours a day and cultivate mediation as a way of life. In the process, they model a culture of nonviolence.

The monastery, wrote the late Thomas Merton, Gethsemani's most famous resident, offers a place "to entertain silence in the heart and listen for the voice of God, to pray for your own discovery."

And: "The contemplative life provides an area, a space of liberty, of silence, in which possibilities are allowed to surface and new choices -- beyond routine choice -- become manifest. It should create a new experience of time ? one's own time, but not dominated by one's own ego and its demands; hence, open to others -- compassionate time."

Thus, theoretically, monasteries are schools -- schools of prayer and peace and compassion. They train monks and their guests to live nonviolently in a world of violence. Monasteries offer an example of a community of peace; they show us the way toward a culture of peace.

And no one need puzzle very hard as to how. Theirs is an example of great simplicity. Withdraw from the culture's violence. Cultivate a discipline of prayer and praise and thereby open yourself to the Holy Spirit of peace. "I did not come here in 1940 for the monastery or the landscape," Br. Camillus told me when I met him in the hallway. "I wanted to spend my life seeking God," he said with a smile. "And I'm still seeking God."

This is the way, here is the answer to our questions. Spend your life seeking God. Yes, it's demanding and time-consuming. But as we discipline ourselves, as we go deeper each day into the search, the fascination -- the false transcendence, the idolatry -- of all things violent (from TV's "Law and Order" to the Bush Administration's imperial law and disorder which massacres Iraqis, steals the resources of others and manufactures nuclear weapons) falls away. And we find ourselves free.

My first visit to the monastery came at the invitation, nearly 20 years ago, of Br. Patrick Hart. Nearly 20 years before that, in September 1968, Patrick had the enviable role of handling Merton's correspondence and publishing details while Merton toured Asia. The role was to be temporary, just until Merton returned. But in Asia Merton died, and Patrick has been Merton's secretary ever since. Had it not been for his dedication to Merton's writings (along with the Merton Literary Trust), dozens of Merton books might never have seen the light of day.

Over coffee, I put the question to him. What is life like in the monastery after all these decades? Not exciting, he said, but not boring either. "We are keeping watch with Christ." Here, I thought, was a beautiful testimony to the life of peace and prayer. "Keeping watch with Christ" -- a great challenge for the rest of us.

I was privileged to keep watch with the monks for those few days. I sat with them in prayer, took my meals in silence, and in that rarified air, read the scriptures. With time, and timelessness, on my hands, I walked the expansive grounds and took notice of the birds, the trees, the ponds, and the fields.

Here, time is "squandered" in the presence of God. How fulfilling, helpful, and healing --to be out of reach for a spell of the violent images our culture calls entertainment. And more, of the culture's bad news, its despair, its fear-mongering, its numbing self-absorption and evangelical selfishness. Days at Gethsemani always renew me. Once again, I breathed in peace and compassion and let go of anger and resentment.

Keeping watch with Christ. Such is the theme of the lectionary readings at this time each year as the liturgical year comes to a close. The times are evil -- keep watch. Which is to say, exercise your faculties of contemplation. Be a visionary, a seer of peace.

Otherwise we have nothing to stand on but the culture's blindness and violence. Keep watch -- "be vigilant," according to Luke, "at all times." Pray daily, meditate, keep times of silence and solitude, read the scriptures, receive the sacraments, spend time with the good news.

This spirit of contemplative nonviolence strengthens us as we oppose our nation's wars and nuclear weapons. As we counter the corporate greed that impoverishes billions. As we denounce our government's terrorist threats against the people of Iran. But it requires that we extricate ourselves from violence -- from violent movies, violent sports, violent games, violent language, violent behavior, and violent attitudes towards ourselves or others. Monasteries and all such communities of peace are like detox centers, where we detox from the violence around us and become sober people of nonviolence. They remind us how to be human in an inhuman time. They point to the simple things: friendship, service, truth, justice, forgiveness, community. Take long walks, enjoy nature, watch the sunset, cultivate the Holy Spirit of peace, and give thanks. Such is the wisdom of the monks.

Even in these whirlwind days, we can turn our backs on the culture of violence, recenter ourselves in the Spirit of peace, and keep watch with Christ for the coming of God's reign.

John Dear's new book, *The Advent of the God of Peace*, with reflections on the daily readings for Advent and Christmas, is now available from www.paxchristiusa.org [1]. The DVD about him, "The Narrow Path," is available from www.sandamianofoundation.org [2]. He will speak Sunday afternoon at the American Film Institute in Hollywood, Ca., and next week in Boca Raton, Fla., and at the annual School of Americas protest. For further info, see: www.johndear.org [3].

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