

The Jesuits gather in Rome

John Dear | Jan. 8, 2008 On the Road to Peace

Last fall, when I stood trial for our Santa Fe antiwar witness, I was asked about my mission as a Jesuit priest. I testified under oath that our job was to "save souls, end wars, liberate the poor from poverty, and welcome God's reign of justice and peace as disciples, friends and companions of Jesus." "Where does it say that?" the judge interrupted. "In the documents of the Society of Jesus, General Congregations 31, 32, 33 and 34," I answered. He looked at me with stunned disbelief. I'm just trying to fulfill my job description, I explained.

This week, hundreds of Jesuit leaders gather in Rome from around the world to convene the 35th General Congregation, the international leadership meeting of the Society of Jesus. The purpose of this assembly is to elect a new superior general, as Fr. Peter Hans Kolvenbach, 80, steps down. Many speculate that the meeting, which will continue through March, may bring new statements about justice and the environment.

In India and Africa, the number of Jesuits is growing, and many serve the poor and work for justice and peace. Here in the United States, with our 28 universities serving the well-to-do, and our 71 secondary and pre-secondary schools, our numbers have dropped from 8,000 a few decades ago to under 3,000, with most members over 60 years old.

NCR asked me to reflect on this Jesuit gathering, but I have such mixed feelings about the Jesuits (not to mention the church), that I can only beg prayers for my order. We're a complicated bunch. This past spring, the *National Jesuit News*, a U.S. newspaper reporting on the Society of Jesus, featured a glowing profile of a Jesuit priest ("Army Chaplain Sees Job as Forming People of Peace," April, 2007) who served as a chaplain in, of all places, Abu Graib, Iraq -- not to minister to the tortured, but to the torturers. Happily, he has left Iraq. Alas, he now teaches the morality of war at West Point (where, incidentally, the police have banned me for life.)

This report was shocking and scandalous to me and my Jesuit friends. I don't understand how we claim to follow the nonviolent Jesus yet support someone who works in a torture center, or an international war headquarters. Unfortunately, given our history of violence, it's not surprising. The Jesuits owned slaves in Maryland up until the 1850s, and did not liberate them. They justified slavery, sold these human beings and used the money to set Georgetown University on a firm financial ground. Many Jesuits throughout history supported war or were part of war. A U.S. battleship is named after a Jesuit. A Jesuit law school dean from Colombia currently serves on the Board of Directors of the notorious "School of the Americas." Jesuit university presidents have awarded honorary degrees to people like Reagan, Bush and Rice. The leading Jesuit publication, *America*, features regular ads paid for by the Pentagon to recruit priests to join the military in support of their killing campaigns. Two Jesuits were involved in the development of the atomic bomb. Until recently, a Jesuit worked at Los Alamos, the U.S. nuclear weapons headquarters.

On top of this, most of our universities and high schools train young people how to murder other people in an evil program called Reserve Officer Training Corp, or ROTC. This work goes against everything Jesus gave his life for, everything we stand for. While I was in Central America in 1985, Salvadoran Jesuit Ignacio Ellacuria talked about ROTC, "Tell the Jesuits of Georgetown that they are committing mortal sin because they are supporting the forces of death which are killing our people." He was assassinated in 1989.

These realities disturb and depress me. After the Second Vatican Council, Pedro Arrupe, the massacre of the Salvadoran Jesuits, September 11th, the sex abuse scandals, the wars on Iraq and Afghanistan, why haven't Jesuits and Jesuit institutions moved forward with the task of disarmament, a prerequisite for any "faith that does justice"? I have spent years trying to end the Jesuits' support of war, to no avail. But I'll keep at it.

I keep at it because of the dozens of heroic Jesuits around the country who continue to inspire and amaze: saints like Daniel Berrigan, who will turn 87 this May; Steve Kelly, currently serving a prison sentence for an anti-torture witness; Greg Boyle and Mike Kennedy serving gang members in Los Angeles; Bill Bischel living in a Seattle Catholic Worker house; Ben Jimenez in Cleveland agitating against war; Jim Gartland running a Christo Rey school in Chicago; Jeff Putthoff helping at-risk youth in Camden, N.J, to become computer experts; George Anderson ministering in Brooklyn, and others.

We Jesuits have a celebrated history of saints and martyrs -- from St. Ignatius and St. Francis Xavier to Edmund Campion and Peter Claver, to Miguel Pro and Walter Cizek, to Alfred Delp and the 80 Jesuits targeted and killed by the Nazis. At the recent protest gathering at the U.S. Army's School of the Americas, Fort Benning, Ga., a list of Jesuits martyred since the 1970s was read out loud. Forty-six names were read, including Ignacio Ellacuria and six other Jesuits of El Salvador. There was Richie Fernando, working in a refugee camp in Cambodia in 1996. Someone tossed a bomb into the camp in the middle of a youth soccer game Richie had organized. Richie jumped on the bomb and saved the lives of dozens of kids. There was Martin Royackers working in a slum parish in Jamaica, preaching against violence, drugs and gangs, only to be assassinated on the church doorstep in 2000. And Thomas Anchanikal, an Indian Jesuit who defended the *dalits* (the "untouchables") from unjust landlords; he was beheaded in 1997.

"What is it to be a Jesuit?" the 32nd General Congregation, under the leadership of Pedro Arrupe, famously asked.

It is to know that one is a sinner, yet called to be a companion of Jesus as Ignatius was? We seek to preach the Gospel in a personal love for the person of Jesus, asking daily for an ever more inward knowledge of him, that we may better love him and follow him? The validity of our mission will depend to a large extent on our solidarity with the poor? Today the Jesuit is a man whose mission is to dedicate himself entirely to the service of faith and the promotion of justice, in a communion of life and work and sacrifice with the companions who have rallied round the same standard of the cross, for the building up of a world at once more human and more divine? As an international body, the Society of Jesus commits itself to that work which is the promotion of a more just world order, greater solidarity of rich countries with poor, and a lasting peace based on human rights and freedom.

In his forthcoming book, *They Come Back Singing: Finding God with the Refugees*, (Loyola Press), my Jesuit brother Gary Smith tells about a pamphlet that's circulating in Uganda. Titled "The Secret Terrorists," it accuses

the Jesuits of fomenting terrorism. "Those damn Jesuits are plotting again," it begins.

"I confess we are plotting," Gary writes. "But there is nothing secret in our plotting. It is this: to overthrow the world's duplicity with the truth of the gospel; to confront injustice with Christ's passion for the poor; to replace violence with peace; to go anywhere, anytime, and by any means to places where we can confront the heart of darkness with the heart of God."

I hope Gary's right. That nonviolent plotting for justice and peace in the footsteps of Jesus drew me into the Jesuits 26 years ago, and keeps me in.

As Jesuit leaders gather in Rome to plot our work for the next few decades, pray with me that we can reclaim our early historic Gospel zeal, the spirit of our saints and martyrs; that we might individually and corporately renounce violence and war once and for all; that we might ban ROTC from every Jesuit campus; that we might have nothing to do with any military anywhere, and instead defend the poor and marginalized from every injustice.

As the Jesuits gather in Rome, I'll appear before a federal judge in Albuquerque, N.M., Jan. 24 to be sentenced for speaking out against the evil U.S. war on Iraq. I hope someday there will be hundreds of U.S. Jesuits in trouble with the law for speaking out against our wars, injustice, and nuclear weapons. Meanwhile, pray for us "sinners, called to be companions of Jesus," that we might yet be worthy of the Name and one day, give newer, even "greater glory" to the God of peace.

If he is not in prison, John Dear will lead a special Lenten retreat on Feb. 22-24, "The Passion, Death & Resurrection of the Nonviolent Jesus," at the Kirkridge Center in Bangor, Pa. (www.kirkridge.org [1]). The DVD, "The Narrow Path," featuring his teachings on Gospel nonviolence, is available from www.sandamianofoundation.org [2]. To attend one of his speaking events, or to host him later this fall for a reading from his forthcoming autobiography, see: www.johndear.org[3]. For info on the Society of Jesus, see: www.jesuits.org[4].

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[1] <http://www.kirkridge.org>

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