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

The Lenten Journey of Gospel Nonviolence (Part 1)

John Dear | Feb. 5, 2008 On the Road to Peace

The 40 days of Lent invite us deeper into the journey of nonviolence, to walk more closely with Jesus to the cross of nonviolent resistance to empire and suffering love for humanity. As we begin this year's holy season of Lent, I hear the Ash Wednesday blessing, "Repent of the sin of war and believe the Gospel of Peace" (my translation), as a call to renounce the violence within us and around us, breathe again the new life of nonviolence, surrender ourselves to God's reign of peace, and walk forward with Jesus on the road to peace.

"Even now, says the God of peace, return to me with your whole heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning," we hear in the Ash Wednesday reading from the prophet Joel (2:12-18). "Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to your beloved God. For gracious and merciful is God, slow to anger, rich in kindness, and relenting in punishment. Perhaps God will leave behind a blessing."

Rend your hearts! Instead of the ritual rending of garments (as the chief priest did during Jesus' trial), Joel tells us to tear our hearts in two. During Lent, we acknowledge our complicity with the social sins of war, greed, violence, poverty, nuclear weapons and environmental destruction. We take responsibility for the world. In prayer, fasting, mourning, weeping, public action, we start over again and return to the God of peace.

I remember many past Ash Wednesdays that have helped me deepen my commitment to nonviolence, beginning with 1980, one of the most important days of my life. I was sitting in the Duke fraternity house, when I suddenly decided to spend my life following Jesus, and then realized that I would have to become a Jesuit. On Ash Wednesday 1984, another novice and I began a series of public witnesses on the steps of the Pentagon. On Ash Wednesday 1991, I led a service of repentance on the steps of the Federal Building in San Francisco where we stood trial for a protest, only to learn later that day that the U.S. had bombed the Ameriyah Shelter in Baghdad, vaporizing some 700 women and children. In 1994, I spent the day in prison preparing for an upcoming Plowshares trial. In 1998, I led a prayer service of repentance outside the houses of Parliament in London.

Five years ago, as Lent began in 2003, John Paul II called upon Catholics everywhere to pray and fast for peace, that the United States would not bomb Iraq, "that the world will find effective ways short of war to secure justice, increase security and promote genuine peace for all of God's people." That Ash Wednesday, he said, "Everyone has to knowingly assume their responsibility and make a common effort to spare humanity another dramatic conflict. By conversion of heart, penance and solidarity, we will become true peacemakers both in our own families and in the world." We did not heed his call, but it remains nonetheless. "Even now, says the God of peace, return to me?."

This Lent, I hope we can pray every single day deliberately and consciously for new miracles of peace: the immediate end of the U.S. wars on Iraq and Afghanistan; the abolition of nuclear weapons, the death penalty, poverty, and starvation; a national pursuit of alternative energy sources and the halting of global warming; the rejection of the just war theory and the church's return to Gospel nonviolence. I hope we can undertake new experiments with nonviolence.

Recently, Catholic friends across the country, The Franz Jagerstatter People Breaking the Silence [1], have called for "40 days of renewal in peace and nonviolence" with ongoing peace vigils at churches and cathedrals. "Inspired by the witness of Blessed Franz Jagerstatter," their statement begins, "angered by the invasion and occupation of Iraq by the U.S. government and the subsequent acts of terror and atrocities committed against the Iraqi people; mourning U.S. casualties, both loss of life and physical and mental injuries; we admit our own complicity by our failure to raise our voices more forcefully. Our Christian faith tradition teaches us that the grace of prayer and fasting can conquer greed and the lust for power that lead to war."

They suggest four goals for Lent: "First, to purify our own hearts. Second, to ask for forgiveness for participating in the violence of war by our silence. Third, to educate Catholics, especially our young, on the nonviolent teachings and life of Jesus. Fourth, to engage the faithful in all U. S. cathedrals to fast and pray for peace for the duration of the Lenten season," and so, to speak out against war.

"We struggle to respond to the gospel of Jesus," they write, "which challenges the church to answer this call to conversion: to change our hearts of hardness, indifference, and complicity to hearts of compassion, solidarity and justice; to fast and pray in our local Cathedral, in a spirit of repentance of the sins of war, terrorism and torture, in a spirit of mourning for all the dead, the wounded and the millions of displaced peoples of Iraq; to take up alms to assist them; to be heralds of the Gospel of nonviolence and peace in a spirit of hope. We petition our Bishops to pray and fast with us to cleanse our souls of the immorality of war, the immorality of torture, and the immorality of occupation. We invite all people of conscience to join our efforts for peace."

As the media proclaims the season of electoral politics, Lent invites into something much deeper, into ongoing personal, social, economic and political conversion, into the God of peace and God's reign of peace and justice. My hope and prayer is that we will make the most of this Lenten season, that it will bear good fruit in the Easter gift of peace, and that "perhaps God will leave behind a blessing."

John Dear will lead a Lenten retreat Feb. 22-24, "The Passion, Death & Resurrection of the Nonviolent Jesus," at the Kirkridge Center in Bangor, Pa. (**www.kirkridge.org [2]**). The DVD, "The Narrow Path," featuring his teachings on Gospel nonviolence, is available from **www.sandamianofoundation.org [3]**. 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 [4]**. For information on the Jagerstatter People Breaking the Silence, contact: **Bernard@franzprayforus.org [5]**.

Source URL (retrieved on *10/07/2015 - 16:13*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/road-peace/lenten-journey-gospel-nonviolence-part-1

Links:
[1] http://www.franzprayforus.org/index.htm
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