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The Lenten journey of gospel nonviolence (Part 3)

John Dear | Feb. 19, 2008 On the Road to Peace

"Can you be a good Catholic and support war?" That was the question put to me last week by CNN's anchorwoman Soledad O'Brien in front of a thousand people at Marquette University's annual "Faith Doing Justice" Mission Week. What could I say? I gave the only honest answer I could think of: "No."

On the panel with me were a professor from Rutgers who lectures on the benefits of the just war theory to the Armed Forces; a Jesuit academic who used to work for the bishops' conference on international issues who is also an expert on the just war theory; and a representative of the U.S. military, a former soldier who spoke passionately of the moral imperative on occasion to kill people to stop the killings.

I felt like I was from another planet. I could not see how Jesus fit in any of their scenarios. In the end, the devout Catholic soldier said I was, in fact, from another planet. "I wish we could all live in John's world," he said, "but we live in the real world where there is evil and sometimes you have to kill to protect people from further evil." I told him to quit the military and join me, not in my own world, but God's reign of nonviolent love and boundless peace.

A few in the audience laughed. No one booed. I felt I made little impression on anyone in the auditorium or on the panel, which I found discouraging.

Afterwards, many students were saying that it was good to get all perspectives and they were glad for the discussion.

They seemed to miss entirely my point that there is no such thing as a just war. It's a great lie, a gigantic myth, an illusion that leads to death. It's conditions certainly no longer apply given our weapons of mass destruction which kill civilians indiscriminately, beginning with the 650,000 dead Iraqi civilians. I like what Bishop Carroll Dozier, bishop of Memphis from 1971 to 1985, said long ago: "The just war theory belongs in the same drawer as the flat earth theory."

In Milwaukee, I tried to explain that Jesus was nonviolent and commanded us to love our enemies, and so if we claim to follow Jesus, we cannot support war. We have to be nonviolent, too. Jesus didn't say, "Love your enemies, but if they're really bad, and they meet these seven conditions -- then go ahead and kill them." Everyone knows that the early Christians adhered to the Sermon on the Mount, that the Emperor Constantine rejected Gospel nonviolence, allowed Christians to be soldiers, and turned to the pagan Cicero to develop a

theory of justified warfare.

Many people have written me lately to explain in earnest how the church has supported warfare for the last 1,700 years. They use that history to justify all sorts of current evils. I don't understand how we can selectively cite the church's history over these last 1,700 years as an excuse for supporting, say, the murder of children in Iraq, or the development of our weapons of mass destruction. The church also waged holy wars (crusades), burnt women at the stake, imprisoned and killed those it didn't like, taught that the earth was flat, and bought and sold slaves. Should we resume those evils as well? Of course not. The church was wrong in each of these examples, just as the church remains wrong whenever it supports killing human beings in war, no matter how noble the cause.

If ever there was a moment in salvation history when warfare was justified when violence was divinely sanctioned, it was in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus was about to be arrested. Peter thought he was right to take out a sword to kill the soldiers to protect Jesus. But just at that moment, Jesus issues a new and final commandment: "Put down the sword. You are not allowed to kill." I think that's when Peter and the disciples first understood Jesus, that he was deadly serious about active nonviolence. These are the last words of Jesus to the church: Put down the sword. Yet we continue to disobey him, and come up with a thousand reasons to kill.

I wanted to say at Marquette: If you're so hell-bent on killing and the just war theory, please stop saying you're followers of Jesus.

I remember Fr. Richard McSorley, who died in 2002, asking sarcastically, "If you're going to justify mass murder, why stop there? Lets have a just adultery theory."

In his book, *New Testament Basis for Peacemaking*, McSorley outlined the theory with the same formality that theologians defend mass murder in warfare.

1. **Last Resort.** Every other means of getting along must be first tried: discussion, advice of a third party, reconciliation, everything short of adultery.
2. **Good Intention.** There must be no intent to harm one's spouse or any other person. The cause must be genuine love and affection for the companion in adultery.
3. **Protection of the Innocent.** The aggrieved partner must not be harmed. Every effort at secrecy must be made. The use of a contraceptive device, or the intent of having an abortion, violate this condition and make the adultery immoral.
4. **Proportionality.** A favorable balance of good over evil must be reasonably hoped for ? Provided these conditions are all fulfilled, adultery is not a violation of the gospel but an act of love and mercy."

"Absurd?" McSorley asks. "Perhaps, but less absurd than the just-unjust war theory. Adultery is a personal act. It does not kill millions of people, or even one person. It does not have government support. It always allows for the possibility of repentance and reconciliation that is precluded by killing. Why is it that most Christians understand the weaknesses of the just adultery theory, but are blind to the greater weaknesses of the just- unjust war theory? Could it be that we consider morality to be limited to individuals and to personal conduct, and that what a group or a government does is beyond the limits of morality? Or do we put the authority of the

government above that of God?"

Mairead Maguire, the Nobel Laureate from Belfast, ends her lectures by inviting those confused about the just war theory, violence and nonviolence, to spend an afternoon alone, for two or three hours in a church, looking up at a crucifix. Take all your questions about violence and nonviolence to the crucified Jesus, she advises, and not only will you begin to be disarmed of your own inner violence, you will hear those great commandments--Put down the sword, Love your enemies, Blessed are the peacemakers--in a new light.

This May marks the 25th anniversary of the U.S. Bishops' pastoral letter on peace. There for the first time in 1,700 years, the church upheld Gospel nonviolence as a legitimate stand along with the just war theory. With the pope's recent statements against the just war theory, I hope the time is coming when we will abandon it once and for all, and make Gospel nonviolence normative for Catholic Christians.

After Marquette, I flew to the Franciscan Renewal Center in Paradise Valley, near Phoenix, Ariz., to lead a retreat, "The Peacemaking Jesus and Ourselves: Living the Sermon on the Mount." We were only a hundred, not a thousand, but it seemed a far more fruitful use of our time. Instead of coming up with excuses to support our country's wars and weapons, we discussed how we can obey the Word of God and practice it for the remainder of our lives.

There I invited friends to follow the nonviolent Jesus and adhere to his methodology of nonviolence, to teach and practice the commandments of Matthew, chapter five. Those who do, he promised, will be considered the greatest in the kingdom of God. I think the time has come to throw away those useless teachings on war, and get on with the exciting task of teaching those new Gospel commandments.

Next week, John Dear will be speaking at St. Francis Xavier Church in Kansas City, Mo., and Trinity Episcopal Church, in Santa Barbara, Calf. He is featured in the DVD, "The Narrow Path," available from **www.sandamianofoundation.org [1]**. His latest book is Transfiguration (Doubleday, with a foreword by Archbishop Desmond Tutu). To attend one of his speaking events, see: **www.johndear.org [2]**.

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