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Nonviolence and the presidential campaign

John Dear | Jul. 15, 2008 On the Road to Peace

Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, the late archbishop of Chicago, was right. The best way to pursue the narrow path and uphold the length, breadth, height and depth of God's love is through a consistent ethic of life, which does not pick and choose between issues but faithfully adheres to all the issues, and says no to every form of violence -- war, racism, sexism, poverty, starvation, the death penalty, abortion, nuclear weapons, global warming and every injustice. Such an ethic renounces every type of killing. And in doing so, it promotes life everywhere and welcomes God's reign of nonviolence in our midst.

Eileen Egan called this ethic "the Seamless Garment," after the woven cloak worn by Jesus, the one the soldiers gambled for after they crucified him. A seamless-garment approach to ethics weaves all the issues in the one vision of the nonviolent Jesus. It disallows our being selective in our ethics. A seamless garment ethic upholds the unity and integrity of all ethical decisions.

As Gandhi said, "Nonviolence is not a garment to be put on and off at will." And as Jesus showed, it is a difficult, costly stand.

Jesus' life, like his garment, was one. His life was a whole, integrated piece and challenges his followers to preserve his unity and consistency. By the same token, it discountenances an ethics of convenience, which in reality is not an ethic at all.

True ethics, based on the moral practice of Jesus, have little to do with pragmatism, policy assessments or social engineering. They have to do with fidelity and consistency, love and peace. True ethics understand that we cannot have both morality and immorality, but that we must put on the mind of the nonviolent Jesus and strive with all our will toward the ever-deeper truth of nonviolence.

It's important to recall this challenging ethic as the election approaches and from television, pulpit and altar, we're pressed this way and that on how to vote. As an ex-con, I'm ineligible to vote. But I agree with church guidelines that say we have to take the full range of issues into account, that you can't pick and choose. I don't think we should be influenced over one sole issue at the expense of many others.

For instance, I won't place my trust in a politician who said he cared about the unborn yet voted for the bombing of children in Baghdad. There is no authenticity in supporting unborn children while supporting killing of our enemy's children.

I mistrust one's "pro life" stance if he calls for one hundred years of war upon Iraq, or the use of nuclear weapons on Iran, or the maintenance of the U.S. imperial military force. If you care for the unborn, you will work for the abolition of war and nuclear weapons. You'll work for the creation of equality among women and men. You'll work for the elimination of poverty and despair -- all of them causes of abortion. A "pro-lifer" will work for the institutionalization of nonviolence across the board.

Likewise, I mistrust those who claim to be against war but support executions and abortions.

On top of this, hanging over all these issues, hovers the threat of nuclear destruction and global warming. If politicians are not working for the elimination of nuclear weapons, how can any Christian support them? Not only are such weapons immoral and blasphemous, they steal the resources that should fund the world's poor for food, homes, healthcare, education and jobs. Ultimately, such weapons are antithetical to democracy.

Nonviolence is consistent -- ingenuous. It opposes anything that hurts another or takes life. A consistent ethic of nonviolence links all issues together. It finds a fundamental truth in the basic understanding that all human life is sacred. Violence is inconsistent -- tumultuous, chaotic. It assaults our minds with lies, confusion, and fears -- all of it to gain a free hand in killing and scapegoating.

Whether a candidate opposes war but supports abortion, or opposes abortion and supports war, practitioners of violence pick and choose who should live on behalf of a particular freedom.

By contrast, practitioners of Gospel nonviolence support life for each and every human being -- the elderly, the oppressed, enemies, the unborn, victims, criminals, murderers, the hungry, children, women, the immigrant, the imprisoned, and all those who are different.

In the months ahead, I hope we all will persist in working for peace and justice and avoid the temptation to place our hopes in the outcome of the election. I hope to see us redouble our work for peace and justice, to articulate our consistent ethic of life, to practice public creative nonviolence, to put our hope in the God of love and peace who can lead us toward a new world if we ask for one.

We'll need this Gospel vision, however the future brightens and dims. In the near future, as the economy lurches toward depression, the U.S. wars on Iraq and Afghan rage, climate disruptions increase, the poor starve and die while the superrich grow richer, and warmakers spend billions for weapons of death -- we need to recall our basic Gospel values, and the fundamental stand of the nonviolent Jesus on behalf of all people, beginning with the marginalized and expendable.

Summer is a good time to reflect on our positions, to pray with friends and family over these life-and-death struggles, and to prepare to speak out. Most of all, it is a time to deepen our adherence to Gospel nonviolence and pursue the politics of Jesus.

These days, it's good to remember that we are first and foremost citizens of the nonviolent reign of God, and with that citizenship comes certain duties and responsibilities, which though costly, will see us through to new blessings.

[**Editor's Note:** John suggests these two sources to help voters think through the issues before voters this election season: The U.S. bishops' Faithful Citizenship [1] and education resources from the Catholic social lobbying group NETWORK [2].]

John's autobiography, *A Persistent Peace*, (440 pages, with a foreword by Martin Sheen), is available Aug. 1 from Loyola Press, and can be ordered now at www.amazon.com [3]. See also: www.persistentpeace.com [4], and www.johndear.org [5].

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