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With Jon Sobrino at the SOA protest

John Dear | Nov. 25, 2008 On the Road to Peace

Thousands of us gathered this weekend, Nov. 21-23, for the annual funeral procession at Fort Benning in Columbus, Ga., there to call for the closing of the notorious "School of Assassins," where the United States trains the Latin American death squads that, over the past few decades, have killed thousands. We gather there each year around Nov. 16 -- the anniversary of the massacre of the Jesuits in El Salvador. This year, the sole Jesuit at the University of Central America to have survived the attack, liberation theologian Jon Sobrino, was our guest of honor.

Born and raised in Spain, Jon moved to El Salvador in 1958 and has lived there ever since, teaching theology at the University of Central America in San Salvador, the Jesuit university.

He directs the Oscar Romero Pastoral Center, located on the site where the six Jesuits, their housekeeper and her daughter were assassinated. His many books include *Christology at the Crossroads*, *Companions of Jesus*, *Jesus the Liberator*, *Christ the Liberator*, *Spirituality of Liberation*, *The True Church and the Poor*, and *Archbishop Romero* . Reprimanded by the Vatican, he carries on, urging us through his books to side with the poor, to defend and advocate for them, and in the process, understand that God places them at the heart of the church.

On Friday night, in the packed ballroom of the Howard Johnson Hotel, Pax Christi gave Sobrino its annual book award for his latest, *No Salvation Outside the Poor: Prophetic-Utopian Essays* (Orbis Books).

The book speaks poignantly about our Jesuit brother Ignacio Ellacuria, the theologian and university president killed with the others in 1989.

"When Ellacuria 'took hold of the reality' of the Third World, he grasped it in an important way as a 'crucified people' ? Ellacuria said that the crucified people are one of the main features of our time, not merely something factual that we may consider, but something central that must be considered, without which we do not have a full grasp of reality," Sobrino wrote.

Sobrino made several addresses in Columbus. Among his statements in those addresses:

"I feel joy being here with you all. We have to say No to the SOA, but that is not my last word. We also have to say Yes to the love of great people -- the six Jesuit martyrs, their co-workers Julia Elba and Celina, the four churchwomen, Archbishop Romero and all the martyrs."

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"They were always on the side of the oppressed, even when it was dangerous. To have known that great love is to say Yes. Behind the hatred on this planet, there is great love, which makes people work for justice. So the last word is not No but Yes."

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"There is a way out of this mess, a way which is way beyond elections. There have been thousands of elections but the world is still worse. Let's not look for salvation outside the poor."

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"What happens to us when we exclude millions of poor people from existence? The most forgotten crisis in the world is the Congo. Four million people have been killed there in the last few years. This is a failure of humanity. Hunger can be eliminated, but we don't want to do it. Every few seconds a child dies. We should say instead, every few seconds a child is assassinated."

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"We need to remember the martyrs. The martyrs were people of great love and love is a rare commodity in the world. They practiced compassion to the end. We need to thank them, because they are saving us from our total inhumanity."

Hearing his words took me back some 23 years, to 1985, to El Salvador, where I lived one long summer. We were a small group of U.S. Jesuit scholastics, full of ideals, a little wet behind the ears. The day before we were assigned work at refugee camps in war zones, we sat awestruck before Sobrino as he admonished us. "You will be overwhelmed with sorrow," he said, "but you will learn joy, because the poor will teach you how to be human."

He's been saying it all his life, teaching that the poor can redeem our humanity. If only we defend them, walk with them, share our lives with them, become one with them. They will convert us.

Jon survived the attack those many years ago -- he happened on that day to be in Bangkok. In my own book, *A Persistent Peace*, my autobiography, I relate our welcoming him in San Francisco, just a few days after the others had died.

We organized and got out the word, and the Monday after the massacre, a thousand gathered around San Francisco's Federal Building and there demanded an end to military aid to the death squads of El Salvador. Arrests were made -- 128 all told, including 18 Jesuit priests, a matter to me of some satisfaction.

Similarly, this past Sunday morning, thousands gathered at the gates of Fort Benning. As Fr. Roy Bourgeois, founder of the SOA Watch movement, addressed the crowd, six people walked onto the base, which was trespass in the eyes of officials. The six were arrested.

The courage of the six filled us with hope, their arrests made us grieve, as we grieved all those killed by SOA graduates. It was, alas, a compounded grief. For news had come down from the Vatican that Fr. Roy, after 36 years with Maryknoll, has been threatened with excommunication, a consequence of his support for the ordination of women.

The pain converged -- on one hand, for SOA victims, on the other, for Fr. Roy. But our spirits did not go under. The purpose of our gathering did not fall to the confusion. Said Roy: Keep pushing the government to close the SOA. Do what you can in the months ahead. Shut down the school and next year we can stay home -- or have a party.

(Along the way, I noticed a sign that read, in effect: "The Vatican did not excommunicate Catholics in the death squads who killed Romero, the four churchwomen, the Jesuits and hundreds of thousands of Latin Americans. The Vatican did not excommunicate Catholics who worked in Nazi cremation ovens, or who participated in South African apartheid. The Vatican did not excommunicate pedophile priests, or the Catholics who continue to build nuclear weapons at Los Alamos or work at the Pentagon. But it excommunicates Fr. Roy and several women for praying.")

The weekend over finally, Jon Sobrino took my arm and pulled me aside. The weekend amazed him, he said. He had no idea there were so many North Americans siding with the crucified people of Central and South America. "This is such a good thing!" he said with joy and wonder. "I'm so glad I came."

We're glad he came, too. And we're grateful for his faithful work to lift up the memory of the martyrs, to speak out on behalf of the suffering billions, and to call us again to the conversion of the Gospel.

Thank you, Jon, for showing me what it means to be a Jesuit -- not to mention a Christian and a human being.

This week, John Dear will speak about his new autobiography, *A Persistent Peace*, (with a foreword by Martin Sheen, published by Loyola Press, available from www.amazon.com [1]) on Nov. 29 in Arlington, Va., at Our Lady Queen of Peace; on Dec. 1 at the Peace Mural Project on M Street in Georgetown in Washington, D.C., and Dec. 2 in Baltimore at St. Ignatius Church. For information, see: www.johndear.org [2].

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