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The clemency of Billy Neal Moore

John Dear | Mar. 24, 2009 On the Road to Peace

Last week, New Mexicans celebrated a great victory for justice and mercy: Governor Bill Richardson signed into law a bill abolishing the death penalty. This historic event came after years of campaigning and lobbying by many people -- politicians, church workers, activists around the state, even family members of murder victims. In the end, moral pressure from all sides backed by the sober analysis of the death penalty made the difference. This great turning point took me back nineteen years to another miraculous time, the campaign to stop the execution of Billy Neal Moore, which led to one of the great spiritual lessons of my life.

I had read about Billy in a 1984 article in *The Catholic Worker*, and I set about to write him to offer my support. ?Your letter was appreciated and I do thank you,? he wrote back, ?but know that the Lord Jesus Christ is in full control of my life.? I had imagined myself at his service. But then with a stroke of the pen, he turned the tables. In what way, he asked, could he be of help to me? I sat down astonished and reached for my own pen. Here was the beginning of a long correspondence. And it dawned on me quickly that, though my new friend, in a series of drunken blunders, had indeed committed the crime, he was a man now deeply committed to Gospel nonviolence.

In 1989 I traveled to Jackson, Ga., to meet him at the Georgia Diagnostic and Classification Center, a fancy name for death row. It was like meeting the converted Paul, pursuer and killer once, now bearer of the grace and wisdom of Gospel nonviolence. He radiated a grace and peace out of kilter with his plight.

Billy told me his story, and I was impressed by his calm demeanor. His troubles began in 1974. He and a friend had drunk themselves into boozy recklessness then tried to rob an old man. The first attempt failed, the friend ran away. But Billy went back. The man fired his shotgun and missed. Billy fired back. ?The minute the man died, part of me did too,? Billy said. He didn?t run, and when the man?s family showed up, Billy broke down sobbing and begged for forgiveness. The government has spent over a million dollars in pursuit of my death, he told me in 1989. If only they had offered grants when he was younger, he said -- so he could find a job, get an education -- he would never have stumbled into such dire straits. Everyone would have been spared pain.

Not long after arriving in a prison, he was baptized bathtub. For the first time, he said, he felt God?s love. There followed a momentous conversion. He became a devout Christian, and spent his days in prayer, writing to hundreds of people around the country and consoling other inmates.

One Thursday morning in August 1990, I received an urgent call. The following Wednesday Billy was scheduled to die. He had spent more time on death row than anyone else. But a last chance remained. State law provided that the Georgia Board of Pardon and Paroles, within 24 hours of the execution, must hear pleas and consider clemency.

Everyone knew the chances were slim. The board hadn?t commuted a sentence in more than a hundred years. Perhaps it was a safeguard once, but the institution had devolved -- it was now nothing more than an auxiliary arm of the executioner. The last rubber stamp before the electric chair. Chances seemed especially remote for Billy who had pleaded guilty. But circumstances presented nothing else to work with.

The hearing was five days off when I arrived, so a group of us set about organizing press conferences, prayer vigils, and a lobbying campaign. Friday night we held a prayer vigil in Atlanta, begging God for a miracle of clemency. We made clemency our watchword. Then off to Macon, where we led a service Saturday night at St. Peter Claver Church.

That Saturday evening, just before the prayer vigil, someone brought me a letter from Billy that had just arrived from death row. He thanked us for our efforts, but took us to task. He had learned a thing or two about clemency, having received it from his victim?s family, having extended it to his fellow inmates -- several of whom grew desperate as their time approached. Clemency from death row was for him a secondary issue. ?Thank you for all you are doing for me,? he began. But how can God take your prayer of clemency for me seriously, he asked, when none of you grant clemency to those who have hurt you?

He was speaking about us, the organizers -- the ones who had come to his aid, who were trying to fight the system. In my case, at least, he knew through our correspondence of my long list of grievances. If you want to do something for me, he said, forgive those who have offended you. Your prayers will have no authenticity until you yourselves offer clemency to everyone who ever hurt you. So do not bother God on my behalf until you yourselves are serious about practicing clemency in your own lives. As for him? He planned on death row a prayer service of his own -- for a peaceful solution to the impending crisis with Iraq.

His letter utterly confounded me. It was one of the most profound witnesses I have ever experienced. Who among us, just days before our execution, would call your main supporters to a deeper spiritual conversion?

On the moment, we devised an entirely new kind of prayer service. I read the letter to the congregation, and a passage from the Gospels. I then invited everyone to recall those who had hurt them, to forgive them and grant them clemency. We sat in silence for a long time. Then we raised chastened hands to the altar and said, ?Dear God, we grant clemency to everyone who ever hurt us. Now please grant clemency to us and give us the miracle of clemency for our brother Billy. Abolish the death penalty and grant clemency everywhere.?

That Tuesday, at the Board of Pardon and Parole hearing, Billy?s family testified, and then local clergy and finally the victim?s family. The Board -- five stodgy white men -- sat impassively, careful not to betray their leanings. Several Board members had spoken on the phone with Mother Teresa. Jesse Jackson issued a statement. And hundreds of others wrote or called. Then came the testimony from Sarah Farmer, niece of Billy?s victim, speaking on behalf of the family. She spoke of Billy?s tears 16 years earlier when he realized what he had done and of the relationship that had since formed. She concluded, water brimming in her eyes: ?This is our brother Billy and you can?t kill him. We?ve lost one family member and we?re not going to lose another. We don?t want you to execute him.?

Thirty minutes later, the Board returned with an historic, unanimous verdict of clemency -- the first time in a 140-odd years. Billy?s sentence had been commuted. A few years later he was quietly released. Today, he

serves as a prison chaplain and remains my good friend. Last fall, he spoke in Rome at the World Anti-Death Penalty Day vigil, and also gave talks all over South Africa.

And now this great day in New Mexico. Said Governor Richardson, ?I do not have confidence in the criminal justice system as it currently operates to be the final arbiter when it comes to who lives and who dies for their crime. [And] the reality is, the system is not perfect -- far from it. The system is inherently defective. DNA testing has proven that. Innocent people have been put on death row all across the country...More than 130 death row inmates have been exonerated in the past 10 years in this country, including four New Mexicans -- a fact I cannot ignore.?

The governor and the Georgia Board of Pardon and Paroles both learned the wisdom of rejecting death -- the governor because there is room for error, the Board because Billy offered proof of a life redeemed. It?s wisdom we all need to learn. We must be open to the facts, meet those languishing in jail, and embark on a spiritual journey toward truth, justice, and compassion.

?Many of the countries that?use the death penalty,? the governor added, ?are also the most repressive nations in the world. That?s not something to be proud of. In a society which values individual life and liberty above all else?the potential for wrongful conviction and, God forbid, execution of an innocent person stands as anathema to our very sensibilities as human beings. That is why I?m signing this bill into law.?

Amen to that, I say. But we can?t leave matters there. As Billy taught me in Macon, if we want a culture of forgiveness and reconciliation, if we want clemency from God, we ourselves must grant clemency to everyone who ever hurt us.

Billy Neal Moore has proven to be my most immediate teacher of the art of nonviolence. And my ears still ring with his magnanimous words -- make clemency a way of life -- and in the spirit of Lent, I pass them on to you. May we all forgive one another and receive forgiveness. May we abolish the death penalty once and for all -- and with it the obscenity of war and nuclear weapons. May we finally begin to live as sisters and brothers in the clement peace of Christ.

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St. Anthony Messenger Press has just published, *John Dear On Peace: An Introduction to His Life and Work* by Patricia Normile. John also has two new books, *A Persistent Peace* (his autobiography, from Loyola Press), and *Put Down Your Sword*, (Eerdmans) a collection of essays on nonviolence, all available from www.amazon.com This week, John is speaking in Michigan; Philadelphia; Loreto, PA; and Buffalo. On April 24-26, John will lead a weekend retreat on the lives and lessons of Gandhi, King, Dorothy Day, and Thomas Merton at the Kirkridge retreat center, see: www.kirkridge.org. For info on his books and speaking schedule, see: www.johndear.org.

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