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# ROTC comes to St. Francis

John Dear | Mar. 31, 2009 On the Road to Peace

Last Friday night, I delivered the annual ethics lecture at St. Francis University, a modern campus near Altoona nestled among Pennsylvania's rolling hills. It's an idyllic landscape for a school of peace. There, before some hundreds of students and faculty members, I focused attention on the world's violence and then reflected on the Franciscan alternative of nonviolence and the stunning life of the nonviolent Jesus. His, I said, is our path for living in these times.

But I've come upon news that left me appalled. Last month the university announced it would bring ROTC to the campus -- the Reserve Officers' Training Corps, a program to train the young in the art of war. I'm not the only one smarting by this intrusion upon Franciscan ideals. Many are disappointed. One is Franciscan Fr. Kevin Queally, a former secretary general of the Franciscans in Rome, who has worked seven years at St. Francis as assistant vice president for mission effectiveness and integration. He resolved to express his objection by resigning. What a loss! And what a sad sign of the times that another Catholic university -- named for Francis, no less -- has militarized.

In first raising objections, Fr. Kevin addressed the faculty in an open letter:

> The question of having ROTC on campus goes to the mission of the university, and the Franciscan goals of higher education and values. We continue to put our mission statement forward as something which guides the institution. It is difficult to reconcile our claim that we have "a spirit for peace and justice" and that "university programs and activities foster such Franciscan values as ... respect for diversity and the uniqueness of individual persons, understanding of ethical issues, and reverence for all life," when we plan to invite on to campus a group that teaches things which go against these values. One example: reverence for all life precludes killing people.

Fr. Kevin did not go so far as to suggest the university be "pacifist," even though, as he says, "many of the personages we put forth as role models are pacifists, such as St. Francis and Dorothy Day."

> The issue here is whether the program belongs on this campus, given our mission and values we proudly proclaim, the Franciscan goals and values which we print up on posters and place all around the campus. How can we claim to have a "spirit for peace and justice" when we would invite military exercises and training on campus to teach strategies for warfare and prepare young men and women for killing in battle?

> The university's goal of instilling "Reverence for all Life and for the Goodness of All Humanity" would be completely violated. Could St. Francis University still claim to *strive to revere life in all its forms, to treat all with dignity and respect* when a program of military training is housed on campus? ... The university claims to *strive to resolve conflict nonviolently and to work for justice within our society and our world. We work to build up God's people everywhere, to reconcile, and to act as instruments of peace in the communities we serve.*

This roiling of the placid waters has, of course, two sides to it. One administrator gave me the official view of things. Some students train with the army already, off campus, he said. Bringing the army to the campus will let officials influence and supervise.

I heard him out, but I'm still convinced his position is naïve. It smacks of moral compromise; it comes off as a pretext to justify financial gain. My own order, the Jesuits, have employed the same argument for some 50 years, and in all that time they've done nothing to mollify military ways. All Jesuit ROTC programs manage to do is churn out well-educated warmakers -- and bring in millions for our institutions. Those students graduate not prepared to follow the nonviolent Jesus but to kill for the empire.

Fr. Kevin insists a Franciscan school should teach peacemaking ways and acclaim the noblest examples. The example of St. Francis, to begin with. The crusades in full swing, the Christian sword at the throats of the feared Muslims, Francis journeyed empty-handed into the war zone to offer friendship to the hated sultan. On Francis' return he barely escaped the wrath of Catholic soldiers.

"St. Francis University should espouse a form of peacemaking as exemplified by St. Francis, one without weapons, one which did not impose a nation's will by military might, one which respects the opponent and even befriends the so-called enemy," he wrote.

Fr. Kevin pressed his argument to university officials:

> If some course were endorsing abortion or stem cell research, you would rightly say this cannot be at a Catholic university ... While everyone here at St. Francis University does not have to be Franciscan, the university does have to be Franciscan. Even your own example of Francis forbidding the lay Franciscans to carry weapons underlines this value. Inviting ROTC to campus is clearly a violation of the mission statement as written, a betrayal of Franciscan values and a selling-out of our Franciscan heritage.

A university official replied. He said Fr. Kevin's objection to ROTC is "passé." But Fr. Kevin has no interest in passing fashion. He insists peacemaking is at the heart of being Franciscan and Catholic, in season and out.

My address, I trust, furthered the debate. I shared stories about the Jesuit-run University of Central America in El Salvador. I was there in 1985, and in the surrounding countryside at the height of the American-backed civil war. And there I witnessed the stony-faced politicians and the bombing of villages and the displaced families and the roaming soldiers rooting out rebels. And amid the maelstrom stood the Central American University, declaring a contrary word. All its institutional power went into confronting war, denouncing killing and teaching peace.

In the United States there is nothing like it. And to my audience I commended the University of Central America as a model for every Catholic and Christian university and high school in the United States.

What would such an institution look like? It would refuse Pentagon money, for starters. Then it would refuse to teach the art of war and, against the tide, teach the methodology and spirituality of Gospel nonviolence. And it would offer some species of practicum in how to non-cooperate with the culture of war.

I'm sorry to see St. Francis University succumbing to the blandishments of our culture of war. I'm sorry to see good people, like Fr. Kevin, put up the good fight then feel they must leave. I wish everyone were working creatively instead to outline a new culture of peace, turn from the passe ways of war, and tutor new peacemakers.

Let's pray for the day when every Catholic and Christian campus will cut their ties with the U.S. military, become training grounds for creative nonviolence, and help us all follow the nonviolent Jesus into the Paschal Mystery of global transformation. That, I submit with Fr. Kevin, is our common mission.

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St. Anthony Messenger Press has just published "John Dear on Peace," by Patti Normile, and John has two new books, "A Persistent Peace" (his autobiography from Loyola Press), and "Put Down the Sword," (a collection of essays on nonviolence from Eerdmans Pub.,) all available from www.amazon.com This week, he will address American University's Washington College of Law in D.C., and lead a Holy Week Day of Retreat in Denver. See www.johndear.org for details.

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