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We apologize for the Iraq War

John Dear | May. 5, 2009 On the Road to Peace

Last week some five hundred of us gathered in Washington, D.C., to repent of the mortal sin of the U.S. war on Iraq. There we expressed our remorse and called for an end to our nation's warmaking. Then we streamed onto the streets to take our plea to President Obama, arriving at his gate as he concluded his TV appearance marking his first 100 days. Some criticize Notre Dame for welcoming the president onto Catholic ground to deliver its commencement address. As for us, we criticize the U.S. government, including the Obama administration, for its ongoing warmaking.

We gathered under the banner of Christian Peace Witness for Iraq, an ad-hoc coalition of 20 Christian peace groups from around the nation (**www.christianpeacewitness.org** [1]). For years we've gathered for protest and prayer. And this year we renewed our demands:

- A quicker end to the war on Iraq.
- The resettling of some five million war refugees.
- An immediate effort to rebuild Iraq.
- A public apology from our government for its pre-emptive aggression and for the suffering in its aftermath.

We gathered in the sanctuary of the National City Christian Church, a glittering neoclassical wonder chiseled from Indiana limestone. We prayed and sang and read scriptures and imbibed the inspiring words of an array of moving speakers. We heard first from Sr. Dianna Ortiz, U.S.-born survivor of torture in Guatemala, author of the powerful memoir, *The Blindfold's Eye*, and founder of Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition International. She read from her book, voice quavering, tears flowing: "No one fully recovers from torture: not the one tortured, nor the one who tortures."

Then a word, through videotape, from Najlaa Al-Nashi, an Iraqi woman displaced by the war. She now serves as the Middle-Eastern Coordinator for Direct Aid Iraq in Jordan (see **www.directaidiraq.org**). Over her life looms the specter of death. Many whom she embraced have died -- her husband, son, mother, many friends. Her home lies in rubble. And yet she refuses to see narrowly. She keeps mindful of the millions of Iraqis killed, injured, displaced -- all of them, to her magnanimous heart, her neighbors.

"I don't know what the future of Iraq is," she said, "but my father taught me to ask, ?What should I do to help?' So we do what we can for peace. All of us can do something. I invite you to do more for the people of Iraq."

And then a word from Rev. Tony Campolo, a respected evangelical author, pastor, and activist. "We have created a Jesus not from the scriptures, but a white Anglo-Saxon militarist. We have created God in the image of American militarism. So we wage war on Iraq and presume God is with us."

He pleaded, "We have to start following the Jesus of the scriptures. When is the church going to start following Jesus, and feed, clothe, love and heal the enemy? When are we going to overcome evil with goodness? Our nuclear weapons are not providing us with any real security. There is no security except in following Jesus. Be

agents of reconciliation. Believe the good news that the forces of darkness will not win. Be committed to the biblical Jesus."

Rev. Lennox Yearwood, Jr., president of the Hip Hop Caucus, followed. He spoke of his years in the military, his conversion to Gospel nonviolence, and his persecution by the government. An Air Force officer gone "bad" in the government's eyes, his name made its way onto a no fly-list. And later in 2007, while vigiling as General David Petreus testified before Congress, he **suffered a beating by police** [2] that left him with a permanent limp.

Tonight, he confessed, he being an African-American minister, it was hard to march on Obama's White House, to protest against war, to court arrest. "But millions of Iraqis look down at us from heaven," he said. "And until war and torture end forever, we cannot stop marching. We cannot stop working for peace."

The speakers stirred our blood, but I found myself most stirred by my friend and mentor Elizabeth McAlister. Long ago, Liz and her husband Philip Berrigan co-founded Jonah House, a peace community in Baltimore. Peace and resistance are Jonah House's raison d'être. For some 35 years they have consistently protested nuclear weapons and war.

Not unlike Jesus in the synagogue, she read from Isaiah: "Every boot that tramped in battle, every cloak rolled in blood, will be burned as fuel for flames" (8:22-9:5). "The U.S. is not the reign of God, but a reign of violent exploitation and terror, with fascism at home and empire abroad ... Isaiah says all the implements of war must be destroyed. Then our hope will be realized. In Isaiah's texts, the people make the difference, people like us. The consequence is that nations do not make war anymore."

As she spoke a gentle rain fell outside, and afterwards we buttoned up our coats and gathered up our peace banners and trudged the many blocks to the White House, a police escort keeping close and keeping out a weather eye. We walked at length and finally arrived and there I delivered a message of support from Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa.

> Dear friends. Our God is looking at you and smiling and saying "How they have vindicated Me!," because God had been wondering what had got into God's head to create us sowing so much mayhem in Afghanistan, Abu Ghraib, Darfur, Gaza, and Iraq. "Oh dear, why did I create that lot?" God thinks. But now God says, "Thank you" for confessing that the war in Iraq should never have happened. You are conduits for God's grace and compassion to flow into a world that is hurting, to heal it. Each of you is an oasis of love, compassion, goodness, laughter, and forgiveness. Hold up God's world so that it may be doused with the waters of healing. God bless you all.

From there, Kathy Kelly led us all to the gates of the White House, there to offer bread -- sign of compassion and rebuilding -- a sign the gatekeepers summarily rejected. Then she and 18 others knelt in prayer and submitted to arrest. Off they went to D.C. Central Booking. The next morning 61 people were arrested at the White House, at the conclusion of the **100-Days-Against-Torture Campaign** [3], calling for a criminal inquiry into the Bush administration's use of torture and the immediate release of innocent detainees still held at Guantanamo.

None of us, need it be added, is deterred. We cling to the Christian Peace Witness for Iraq statement. It rings as true after the arrests as before. "We will pray and act to become a nation that funds human needs and programs of social uplift over armaments and military action, and through our conversion, we will experience the promise of resurrection and new life."

With this hope in mind and heart, we continue our pursuit of a disarmed world.

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St. Anthony Messenger Press has just published *John Dear On Peace*, by Patricia Normile. John's two new books are *A Persistent Peace* (Loyola Press) and *Put Down Your Sword*, (Eerdmans). For information on his books and speaking schedule, see: **www.johndear.org**.

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