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On the death of Fr. Larry Rosebaugh

John Dear S.J. | May. 26, 2009 On the Road to Peace

He was 74 years old, legendary in the peace movement for his anti-war actions, and for his decades of service to the poor of Latin America. And last week, in Guatamela, during a gangland-style robbery, Fr. Larry Rosebaugh was shot and killed.

His death shocks us into recognizing once again the world?s unacceptable, rampant violence and rank poverty. But his life instructs us on how to serve Christ embodied in the poor and persecuted. Larry lived a most Christ-like life, which calls for gratitude and honor, as well as emulation. His life and death invites us beyond our liberal Catholicism, mainstream Christianity, and all-American normalcy to radical Gospel-based discipleship.

News reports say that two masked men brandished weapons and stopped Larry?s car. Inside were four other priests, all Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, on their way to a regional meeting. The gunmen robbed them of cash and cell phones, and then opened fire. A priest from the Congo suffered serious wounds; Larry died then and there.

I behold the scene and feel overwhelmed. How to reconcile that one so dedicated to nonviolence should suffer such brutality? But then Larry expended his life in solidarity with those who suffer violence. Even, as it happened, to the point of death. He served the poor throughout the Americas, resisted war, suffered imprisonments -- and throughout, he carried himself humbly, quietly and prayerfully. His faithfulness and demeanor invite us to take a step forward on the way of the cross, a narrow path rarely heard about any more.

His faithfulness stretched over many decades. Inspired by Dorothy Day, Larry joined the Milwaukee Catholic Workers in the mid-1960s. This work led to his participation in the 1968 Milwaukee Fourteen action, when his group burned 10,000 selective service files with homemade napalm. For that, he spent two hard years in prison.

In 1975, he hitchhiked to Brazil to serve the poor under the leadership of Dom Helder Camara. One day police arrested him as he distributed food in Recife, and in prison guards beat him and threatened to kill him. Had it not been for international pressure, he might have vanished, as had so many others who stood up for the rights of the poor.

They released him finally, just as Rosalyn Carter toured South America. She agreed to meet him, and he told her about the atrocious lack of human rights in Brazil.

As the '80s dawned, his resistance took on new dimensions. In 1981, he protested at the Pantex nuclear weapons facility in Amarillo, Texas, and for that spent a year in prison. There he received a visit from Bishop Leroy Matthiesen -- **2009?s winner of the Pax Christi Teacher of Peace award** [1] -- and shortly afterwards the bishop called upon all Catholics who work on nuclear weapons to quit their jobs. He would raise funds, he promised, to support families as they searched for employment elsewhere.

In 1983, Larry joined Fr. Roy Bourgeois and another friend on the grounds of Fort Benning, Ga., where Salvadoran death squads were being trained. Late one night, the trio scaled a tree with a speaker and blasted an

audiotape of Archbishop Romero?s last sermon, which called upon all soldiers to disobey orders to kill. It was a voice the soldiers well knew. Lights went on in the barracks in an instant, and guards scoured the wooded area in search of Romero?s voice from on high. For this bit of audacity, Larry did eighteen months.

Then there was his arrest at a nuclear missile silo at the Whiteman Air Force base in Missouri. After that, as I understand it, he spent some time at the New York Catholic Worker. Then he moved to El Salvador, where I first met him. During the last decade or so, when not helping out his mother in St. Louis, he lived in Guatemala, first in a poor, remote parish, and then during the last three years, among the homeless poor, often on the gritty streets.

It was his highest calling, his most profound source of meaning. He wrote a friend recently: "This Holy Week, I had three good days of retreat by myself in a great quiet place with beautiful trees and nature, only to view the devastated living conditions of the poorest just across the way. To have that reality so close made for an even better Holy Week for me."

Daniel Berrigan reminisced to me about him. ?I last saw him a few years ago in St. Louis, where I had gone to give a talk. Larry and another priest friend were not getting much support from their Order, and I tried to help out, but it got nowhere. He was very self-effacing, and I wish I had known him better.?

His friend Fr. Carl Kabat shared with me his fond thoughts. ?I knew him for 55 years.? Carl, 75, runs a Catholic Worker house in St. Louis and has spent 17 years of his own life in prison for nonviolent anti-war activities. He had just written to Larry and they were planning Larry?s final return to the States, to live and work together in St. Louis.

Carl recalled playing baseball with Larry in the seminary, teaching high school students together in Duluth, and getting arrested together over the years. ?Larry was a very humble person, a beautiful person, very quiet. He was known as the saint among us because he never made too much noise, while I was known as the knucklehead.?

Carl heard that Larry had died, just before crossing the line last Tuesday night to protest an impending execution at Missouri?s death row. The next two days he spent in jail, remembering Larry. ?That was the right place for me to be to memorialize his beautiful life.?

Art Laffin of the D.C. Catholic Worker added his reflections. ?While all of us who knew and loved Larry try to bear the pain of his shocking death, I know Larry, being such a Christ-like man of compassion and love, would want us to reach out and pray for the one who killed him. I will always remember Larry as a person of tremendous humility, compassion, courage and an abiding faith and hope in Christ's cross and resurrection.?

During these times of division, disillusionment, and despair in the church, Larry?s life and death stand out as a stunning reminder of what the church could be, what priests could be, what every Catholic and Christian could look like.

Not too long ago, he wrote his memoir, ?To Wisdom Through Failure.? The title says a great deal. No mainstream publisher or book store would sell a book about the spirituality of failure; indeed, they market books about God?s plan for our success, wealth and power, as if Jesus never advocated poverty or was executed by the empire. Larry, however, turned aside false first world spiritualities, and risked failure every day trying to follow the abandoned, crucified Jesus.

Larry shows us what we could be, if we but dared the same risks -- radical, humble, gentle, Christ-like disciples living in solidarity with the poor, in resistance to empire, periodically imprisoned for our nonviolence, willing to give our lives nonviolently for humanity, in prayerful trust of our beloved God.

His death calls us beyond our comfortable lives in the culture of greed and war, toward a more Christ-like life that enters the world?s suffering, risks suffering of our own, and emulates the crucified Christ. Here is a great gift and a great invitation. Larry Rosebaugh, presente!

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John Dear will offer a weekend retreat on the Sermon on the Mount at Loyola University in Chicago on June 26-27. To register, contact, www.asrenewal.org, or email, aluther@luc.edu. St. Anthony Messenger?s 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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