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To be pro life is to be nonviolent

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

Last week, one dedicated Christian killed another during church services in Wichita, Kansas. Both men thought they were doing God's will. One -- the zealous anti-abortion activist, Scott Roeder, believed in 'justifiable homicide' to bring to a halt the activities of the other -- the abortion doctor, George Tiller. I grieve for both of them, for everyone in that scene, for all of us. Both were far from the nonviolent Jesus, but so are we all. This sad event confirms what many of us have been saying for years. We all need to repent of our violence and discover Jesus' way of nonviolence.

There is a reason for this madness. For seventeen hundred years we have rejected the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus' truth about nonviolence ('Put down your sword. Love one another. Love your enemies. Be as compassionate as God'). In the fourth century, we made a ruinous accommodation, and started down the path toward the so-called Just War theory -- and Christians have been killing Christians ever since. Popes, bishops, priests and ministers have blessed mass murder, and still do so, and assume they are doing God's will.

The Just War theory opens Pandora's Box. It allows for a time when it is permissible to declare war for God's sake. With each condition we move farther away from the Sermon on the Mount. As we have assumed war is justifiable, so we have come up with other occasions when killing is justified. We execute people, build nuclear weapons, and support jingoistic militarism, and all the while believe we are ushering in God's reign.

The German bishops who served Hitler are but one extreme example of this blasphemous rejection of Gospel nonviolence. The American bishops and priests who avow U.S. war plans and defend nuclear weapons show a similar anti-gospel ethic of justifiable killing. Dr Tiller, I submit, held a similar anti-gospel ethic. And so did Roeder, his killer.

On April 19, Kansas City's Bishop Finn addressed a group which claims the name "Pro Life," saying, "We are at war." His remarks, peppered with militaristic imagery, failed to demonstrate the sweeping love of the nonviolent Jesus. He spoke only of the unborn, of "pro life" issues, but showed no concern for those targeted by our bombs in Iraq, Afghanistan or Pakistan. He expressed no concern for the billions of people who have no homes, food, healthcare, education, jobs or dignity. He shed no tears for those who die from poverty due to our first world greed. He does not concern himself with nuclear weapons or global warming -- which, even from his standpoint, will harm the unborn.

As a priest and a human being, I *too* am against abortion. But as a follower of the nonviolent Jesus, I prefer Cardinal Bernardin's "Consistent Ethic of Life." One cannot pick and choose contradictory issues. Are you "Pro Life," "for life," "for the God of Life?" Then stand against every war, handgun, weapon, greedy corporation, and execution. Stand against poverty and starvation and disease and extinctions and racism and sexism and environmental destruction. As well as abortion.

But that's only the beginning. You have to look deep within at the roots of your own violence. Then allow the Holy Spirit to disarm you and transform you into a channel of universal nonviolent love. From this process, the good fruit of peace flows. You begin to uphold a vision of nonviolence for all humanity, all creatures, and all creation. You experience a God of nonviolence "who makes the sun shine on the good and the bad and the rain to fall on the just and the unjust." Few nurture such universal, nonviolent, love, and that is precisely our problem.

Bishop Finn's tired talk of "the church militant," of "warriors in a spiritual battle," played into the hands of our militaristic culture. The bishop's language breeds violence. His fractious call to arms encourages the violence within the movement which calls itself "Pro Life." It stirs the violence latent in all of us. Can't we face hard issues with the language of unconditional love, in a spirit of compassion, with the creativity of genuine, common ground nonviolence?

In response to Dr. Tiller's assassination, most of the major "Pro life" organizations around the country denounced it. Most insisted that their "pro life" group or movement is nonviolent. I doubt it. Despite these claims, I am still searching for a group which adopts that name "Pro Life" and is truly committed to nonviolence.

A "Pro Life" group committed to nonviolence would never use hateful language. If they were nonviolent, they would understand the connection between all of life and so speak out with similar passion against war, poverty, handguns, nuclear weapons and catastrophic climate change. Such a group would advocate the nonviolence of Jesus and pay closer attention to his teachings of love, compassion and peace. A nonviolent, pro-life group would try to be as gentle, unarmed, vulnerable, and non-threatening as a new born babe, as lambs sent into the culture of wolves. Such a radical commitment to life would never find a home with political parties and leaders who supported the bombing of children, rewarded billionaires, tortured prisoners and lied.

Alas, despite claims that they are "nonviolent," I do not see much evidence that the movement which uses the name "Pro Life" understands what nonviolence really means. Until they show concern for the taking of any life, until they oppose the culture of war and the nuclear threat and poverty and executions and environmental destruction, to my mind they remain unworthy of the label "Pro Life." Their commitment to the unborn will continue to lack credibility.

To be fair, such nonviolence is also rare in the so called "peace" movement. We're all in some measure addicted to violence. We, all of us, are neophytes when it comes to nonviolence. I'm disappointed that so few demonstrate any sincere interest in the study and practice Gospel nonviolence.

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I think the time has come for a serious re-examination of the "Pro Life" movement as it currently exists in the U.S. It is filled with a spirit of violence, which will only continue to breed hatred. If an extremist for peace had killed an official in the Bush Administration, I would have insisted that we stop all peace movement activities.

This is what Gandhi said in the early 1920s, after some of his movement activists beat five British soldiers to death. He called off the whole national civil disobedience program, went on a fast of repentance and resigned from the movement. He insisted, from his daily reading of the Sermon on the Mount, that there is no cause, however noble, for which we support the taking of a single human life.

In that spirit, I propose that the so called "Pro Life" movement stop all its activities, perhaps for several years, and that the U.S. bishops take the lead. What we need is a thoughtful examination of our addiction to violence, and a new systematic study of Gospel nonviolence. Every parish in the United States -- and the world -- should become a training camp in Gospel nonviolence.

We have to help one another uproot and renounce whichever form of violence holds us captive. The task is to deepen our awareness about our complicity with violence and learn how to become genuinely nonviolent as individuals, as a church, as a nation and as a world.

Some months ago in Santa Fe, I joined friends in a day of lobbying against the death penalty at the Capitol building. A Franciscan priest in brown robes was with another church group, lobbying against abortion and gay marriage. He confronted me with a hard word or two. "You should stop all of this anti-death penalty, anti-war and anti-nuclear work," he said adamantly. "None of that matters." I was astonished and saddened. How far we have drifted from the nonviolent Jesus, I thought.

Then last month, I met another Franciscan priest, this one sporting Army fatigues and a cross around his neck. He was an Army chaplain who told me fervently how he blesses the soldiers as they embark for war, and how hard it is to counsel them when they return home suicidal -- or in coffins to be buried. He too claimed to be a "true pro lifer." Once again, I found myself full of compassion and sadness at our predicament.

Jesus, a victim of the death penalty himself, could see all of this on the horizon. His message of nonviolence was consistently rejected during his public life. Yet he stubbornly forgave and loved and tried to liberate, both oppressors and oppressed, from the shackles of violence. He taught nonviolence and enacted it to the bitter end, and it cost him his life, but with his last breath he practiced what he preached, saying "Put down the sword," and "Forgive them."

I write as one who has struggled for 29 years to teach and practice an authentic nonviolence in my own culture, church, and time. It always seems like one step forward, two steps back. Currently I'm facing a possible six-month prison sentence for kneeling in prayer on Holy Thursday on Creech Air Force Base, Nevada, in protest against our drone weapons systems which are killing civilians in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

This past weekend I joined twenty five Pax Christi New Mexico friends in a careful reading of the Sermon on the Mount. From Friday night through Sunday morning, we studied it line by line, word for word. We were trying to hear exactly what Jesus was saying, to figure out the meaning of the Beatitudes and the commandment to love our enemies, and to come up with ways to put his words into action in our

own lives. It was difficult, intense, exciting and meaningful.

My hope and prayer is that all of us -- ?Pro-lifers? and ?peaceniks,? ?liberals? and ?conservatives,? ?left and right,? -- can become Sermon on the Mount people and learn the Gospel truth that killing is never justified, that abortion and murder and war and nuclear weapons and violence of all kinds are wrong, that all of us are summoned to an entirely new way of life, a life founded on the wisdom of Jesus? nonviolence.

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John Dear will lead a weekend workshop 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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A Message from John Dear about his *NCR* Columns

Dear Friends,

Thank you very much for reading and supporting my weekly column. I?ve been writing these reflections every week for three years now, and am blessed to share my reflections, journeys, concerns and hopes.

I write now to ask your help with these writing projects. Each week about 2,500 people read these columns. *NCR* and I would like to reach a regular audience of 5,000 people by the end of the year. Would you please send an email to ten friends and ask them to sign up and receive my weekly column for free when it is published every Tuesday morning at NCRonline.org. Any other outreach you can give to promote this column would be greatly appreciated. Here's a page **direct link to the e-mail sign up**.

Thanks, too, for sharing your responses to my reflections. And thank you for all you do for justice, disarmament and peace, for teaching and practicing Gospel nonviolence.

God bless you,

Fr. John Dear, S.J.

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