

'My rosary is my only weapon'

John Dear | Jun. 16, 2009 On the Road to Peace

Fr. Gerard Jean-Juste, 62, of Haiti -- one of the finest priests I have known and one of the world's great prophets of peace and justice -- passed away May 27. Sick with cancer already, he suffered a stroke and died in Miami. The death of a saint is always an occasion of sorrow, joy and reflection. For years this saint has been a presence of steadfast hope in that forlorn island of poverty and despair. His death invites us carry on his work of hope, struggle, justice and healing.

His single-minded mission was selfless service, prophetic proclamation and freely tendered nonviolent love -- the kind of devotion that attracted the poor but also persecution from powerful quarters. He was squirreled away in hiding when I met him, in October 1992. The occasion was the 500th anniversary of Columbus's arrival to the Western hemisphere, and to mark it, I led a Pax Christi delegation to Haiti. A high priority for us was to visit the legendary Fr. Gerry.

There we took in as best we could Haiti's litany of suffering. Here is the poorest nation in our hemisphere, home to nearly seven million, the vast majority of them desperate and hungry, a nation battered on several fronts, from a series of oppressive colonizers, including the United States, to periodic rounds of hostile weather. Last fall, hurricane winds swept through and took down bridges and made villages vanish under rivers of mud.

Back in 1992, the day before we headed out, I led a little retreat for our Pax Christi group focused on Luke's Gospel story of the rich man and Lazarus (16:19-31). It was no stretch to see the parallels. The United States, I said, is the rich man. And right at our front door, like Lazarus, is impoverished Haiti, their cries never reaching our ears.

And what does the Gospel say? It says: hear, come to their aid, feed them, support their nonviolent struggle for justice and bread. Otherwise, like the nameless rich man, the name United States will lose its luster. And we'll find ourselves outside Abraham's embrace, a far chasm away from the God of the poor. (For more, see my book, *Jesus the Rebel*.) And with that we were on our way.

Shortly we arrived and met with dozens of humanitarian leaders, most in hiding. We heard their stories, witnessed their tears, and for a moment shared the dangers they faced. The tour over, we addressed the delegation of the Organization of American States and made a few demands. Reinstatement of President Jean-Bertrand, we said. Disband the death squads and repeal oppressive laws. Help build social infrastructures so that all might have education and the means to earn their bread.

We spoke daringly, inspired and emboldened by Fr. Gerry. He was ostracized by American and Haitian bishops, but none of that deterred him. He persisted as a champion of human rights, a fearless bearer of justice, and a preacher of the stature of Martin Luther King, Jr. He was a tireless advocate for the poor, a model Christian.

Fr. Gerry was born in Haiti and educated in Canada and the United States. He was ordained in Brooklyn in 1971 after earning a degree at Northeastern University in Boston. In the late 1970s, he set up the Haitian Refugee Center in South Florida to deal with the Haitian "Boat People," a flotilla of refugees fleeing thugs and

government crime and rank poverty. These were the poor on our doorstep, and neither the governments of the United States and Haiti nor the Catholic church paid them any mind. Fr. Gerry thunderously reprimanded them.

He returned to Haiti in 1991. But when a military coup ousted Aristide, dictatorial forces again vied for power, and they dimly regarded Fr. Gerry's agitating for the well-being of the poor. A pall of threat descended, and for three years he lived in hiding.

Aristide returned to power in 1994, and Fr. Gerry took up residence at St. Claire's church, holding forth daily like a modern day Jeremiah. But then, in 2004, there came another coup, and members of the new regime targeted Fr. Gerry quickly. They falsely charged him with the murder of a journalist and locked him in prison, where he fell ill. The diagnosis -- leukemia. International pressure secured his release to Miami for treatment. But in 2007 a judge extradited him back to the island and charged him with possessing weapons, to which Fr. Gerry replied famously: "My rosary is my only weapon." All charges were dropped.

Wrote his friend and lawyer, Bill Quigley:

Jean-Juste was a literally a holy terror to the unelected powers of Haiti and the elected but unaccountable powers of the U.S. ... People streamed to his church to ask for help. Mothers walked miles from Cite de Soleil to his parish to beg him to help them bury their children. Widows sought help. Families with sons in prison asked for a private word. Small packets of money and food were quietly given away. Visitors from rural Haiti, people seeking jobs, many looking for food, police officers who warned of new threats, political organizers with ideas how to challenge the unelected government, reporters and people seeking special prayers -- all came. ...

For years he lived on the run in Haiti, moving from house to house. When he was arrested on trumped-up charges, he refused to allow people with money to bribe his way out of jail so he could stay with the poor and share their treatment.

Happily, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently announced the canceling of \$20 million of Haiti's national debt (though all of it should be cancelled; see www.jubileusa.org). And some see hope in Bill Clinton's being the U.N. liaison to Haiti.

I asked Brian Concannon, the director of the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti about it. "The attention Bill Clinton can bring to Haiti is an opportunity for improvement in Haiti," Brian said, "but I fear that there's going to be a desire to look for easy solutions, instead of dealing with its radical inequality." The solution to inequality, he says, is for the U.S. to help Haiti build new infrastructures to restore its agriculture programs to feed its people.

In a *Boston Globe* op-ed in January, Brian and my college friend, Dr. Paul Farmer, founder of Partners in Health, published their ideas more formally.

We will need to invest in democracy. Three days' spending in Iraq or two weeks' interest on the bank bailout could fund Haiti's entire government for a year. Prudent, depoliticized investments in Haiti's democracy will yield dividends of prosperity and stability to Haiti, and will save U.S. taxpayer dollars in the long run by reducing the flow of refugees and drugs to our shores. Perhaps most important, by helping rebuild a better Haiti, we will show the world how, in President Obama's words, "We are ready to lead once more."

"It's a unique moment," Brian says, "a new opportunity, with the political situation ... to look at Haiti's fundamental problems. Fr. Gerry was extremely vital because he talked about Haiti's fundamental problems. ...?"

To lose Fr. Gerry, he said, is to lose an important voice.

The poor and those in solidarity with them seconded Brian's sentiments. Last week, at Fr. Gerry's funeral in Miami, the mourners numbered some three thousand. Afterwards he was flown back to Haiti and buried in his home village.

This weekend, my friend Paul Farmer sent me his thoughts.

Fr. Gerry Jean-Juste was a lot more than a hero and a friend. He was more than a defender of Haitian refugees. Fr. Gerry was more than a prisoner of conscience, just as he was more than a tireless advocate for the poor and marginalized, wherever they live (and, too often, die untimely). Gerry was more than a noted human rights campaigner, and more, even, than a voice for the voiceless, a prophet. Gerry was also, and (to me, most importantly) a humble parish priest who worried about such mundane matters as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and visiting the prisoners. Even when he was himself imprisoned unjustly, he took these and other charges seriously. We will miss Fr. Gerry more than we can say, and must do all we can to continue his efforts to promote the dignity of all of God's children.

In honor of his life, I invite one and all to learn more about Haiti and join the Haitian people's struggle. I recommend the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti at www.haitijustice.org, as well as www.haitiaction.net and www.Haitisolidarity.net and Dr. Paul Farmer's organization, www.partnersinhealth.org. A great way to bridge the gap with Haiti is to set up a sister parish in Haiti with your own local parish. There is a fine organization that coordinates such projects (see www.parishprogram.org).

Together we give thanks for Fr. Gerry's Gospel life and pledge to carry on his prophetic work for the poor.

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Next week, John Dear will lead a weekend workshop on the Sermon on the Mount at Loyola Univ. 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 or to invite him to speak at your church or school, see: www.johndear.org.

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