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Pax Christi, keeper of a hidden tradition

Tom Roberts | Jul. 22, 2009 NCR Today

It has become cliche to say that the greatest kept secret in the church is its social justice tradition. I think it is getting fair airing today having become a topic of political chatter at the highest level and having received a boost with the last papal encyclical.

So I?ll venture to suggest that there?s an even deeper secret that cuts across denominational lines: the themes of Gospel nonviolence and love of enemies.

Quick, when?s the last time you heard anyone preach on those themes as constituent elements of Christianity?s sacred texts? When was the last time you heard a diocesan priest draw out the implications of those themes for U.S. Catholics?

For too long in the case of Catholic social teaching, the reservoir of wisdom was kept largely by small groups on the sidelines of the main event. So it is with nonviolence. Small groups and committed individuals keep the teachings and the tradition alive and one of those groups, indispensible to the mission, is Pax Christi USA, which recently concluded it?s annual meeting, held this year in Chicago.

One of the individuals who understood the implications of that message for Catholics in the United States is Bishop Leroy Matthiesen, the 88-year-old retired bishop of Amarillo, Tex., who, soon after his appointment during the Reagan era, asked Catholics in his diocese to walk away from their jobs at the Pantex Plant, where nuclear weapons were assembled.

He received this year?s Pax Christi Teacher of Peace Award. Recalling that time, he said: ?I remember one morning reading a verse in the Psalms, ?A vain hope for safety is the war horse. Despite its power it cannot save.? I don?t know what made me do it, but I immediately thought, ?A vain hope for safety is the nuclear weapon. Despite its power, it cannot save!??

NCR columnist Jesuit Fr. John Dear provides a much fuller report [1] on Matthiesen?s award and the rest of the program at this year?s Pax Christi conference, including the organization?s appeal for more intense work to bring about a greater reduction in the world?s stockpile of nuclear weapons.

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[1] http://ncronline.org/blogs/road-peace/bishop-matthiesen-teacher-peace