NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Unless the grain falls

John Dear | Sep. 9, 2009 On the Road to Peace

In the last few weeks, three laudable men died -- Senator Ted Kennedy, Fr. Coman Brady, and Jim McGinnis -- and the rash of deaths has me pondering not only their praiseworthy lives but the ineffable mystery of life itself.

The rich press coverage of Kennedy's funeral impressed me. So did the vehemence of those who assailed his record. I for one give thanks for his fight for civil rights, social justice, and universal healthcare. And I rejoice in his public stand against Bush's war on Iraq, "the best vote of my career," he said. I was moved to see footage of him reflecting on a politics of hope, on redemption and resurrection, on persevering in the good fight.

In 1985, he provided a crucial letter of endorsement for me. I took it with me to El Salvador, at the height of the war, during which time I worked at a church-run refugee camp near the Gusapa volcano, in the center of the warzone. Death squads lurked along the edges of the camp and now and then they encroached threateningly. At which point, I, one of few gringos there, was dispatched to persuade them to depart. I invariably produced the letter, and at the name "Kennedy," they turned and stalked off. Years later I had the privilege of meeting him in Derry, Northern Ireland, and he encouraged me to continue working for peace.

Fr. Coman Brady was the opposite of Ted Kennedy. A shy, quiet, humble Irish priest, he became the pastor of Saint Vincent Ferrar Church in Brooklyn in 1986. A close friend of some of my family, he dedicated himself to serving the poor, mainly the Haitian and Jamaican parishioners who packed his church.

Though quiet and humble, he was a rock for many of us. He attended weekly anti-war vigils in Manhattan. This summer, he had been passing out folded red hearts to passers-by in front of the United Nations. "Expand Your Heart," it said on the outside. And inside, his sage advice: "Be open to new ideas. Live gently. Live simply. Laugh often. Love deeply. Be hospitable. Give generously. Stand for a cause. See God everywhere. Dream into being a world without war!"

In June the parish threw a huge party to celebrate his 50th anniversary as a priest. He was just about to head home for a six week visit when doctors discovered cancer. After immediate surgery, he died suddenly of a heart attack.

Coman had two funerals-- nearly a thousand attended on a Thursday night, and the same number the next morning. Joyful singing lifted the roof and surprised newcomers, including church officials and Irish visitors. Loving testimonies, bittersweet memories, words of gratitude and of sorrow -- they hung in the air. The air was filled, too, with a sense of an end of an era. Widespread love for a priest is a rare thing nowadays.

And then Jim McGinnis, an ordinary layman but an extraordinary peacemaker. A San Franciscan born in 1942, he earned a doctorate in philosophy. He spent time in the National Guard in Memphis during the time of Dr. King's assassination which launched Jim on a journey toward nonviolence, and eventually a pilgrimage to Gandhi's India and status as a conscientious objector. For four decades Jim sowed seeds of nonviolence around the country. In 1970, in St. Louis, he co-founded the Institute for the Study of Peace, later known as the Institute for Justice and Peace, and campaigned for an end to the Vietnam War.

One of his greatest publications was the Institute's "Pledge of Nonviolence." Another of its creations was "Educating for Peace and Justice: A Manual for Teachers," a program for teaching peace among high school students. Parenting for Peace and Justice, was another, co-authored with his wife Kathy. And more recently he authored Praying for Peace Around the Globe, a beautiful collection of prayers.

I worked with Jim on and off for years, mainly through Pax Christi. He was guileless, humble, wise, a committed peacemaker. During a peace conference in Assisi, he hauled me to the top of a mountain before sunrise and there with a small gathering of friends, led us in the St. Francis prayer as the sun rose over Assisi. He wanted us to see it exactly as Francis did. A holy morning, and quintessentially Jim.

This past July, a group of us old-timers sat around reminiscing about our days in the Pax Christi movement. And among the circle were Kathy and Jim. The gathering was companionable and full of laughter, and shortly the talk turned toward my impending 50th birthday, Aug. 13. How should I spend it? How to mark the half-centennial?

The big day came and later the chilling news came down. Jim had headed out for his morning walk and along the way was stricken by an apparent heart attack and died. Aug. 13, my 50th birthday -- the day Jim entered the new life of resurrection.

Jesus tells us that "unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it will remain just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit" (Jn. 12:24). Jim -- along with Ted Kennedy, Coman Brady and so many other peacemakers -- has entered upon that paschal mystery. I trust that their lives and deaths will bear good fruit in a new harvest of justice, nonviolence and peace.

I judge things these days from a pensive mood -- what with the atrocious wars, violence, corporate greed, poverty, executions and nuclear weapons -- and I've decided that the best way to honor them is to continue their work. It seems we live in a world of permanent war. Like Coman and Jim, we have to undertake a permanent campaign for peace.

I recommend Jim's "Pledge of Nonviolence," and offer here below his version composed for families, in hopes that it might be spread far and wide:

> Making peace must start within ourselves and in our family. Each of us commits ourselves as best we can to become nonviolence and peaceable people:
>
> **To Respect Self and Others:**
> To respect myself, to affirm others, and to avoid uncaring criticism, hateful words, physical attacks and self-destructive behavior.
> **To Communicate Better:**
> To share my feelings honestly, to look for safe ways to express my anger, and to work at solving problems peacefully.
> **To Listen:**
> To listen carefully to one another, especially those who disagree with me, and to consider others' feelings and needs rather than insist on having my own war.
> **To Forgive:**
> To apologize and make amends when I have hurt another, to forgive others, and to keep from holding grudges.
> **To Respect Nature:**
> To treat the environment and all living things, including our pets, with respect and care.
> **To Play Creatively:**

To select entertainment and toys that support our family's values and to avoid entertainment that makes violence look exciting, funny or acceptable.

To Be Courageous:

To challenge violence in all its forms whenever I encounter it, whether at home, at school, at work, or in the community, and to stand with others who are treated unfairly.

This is our pledge. These are our goals. We will check ourselves on what we have pledged once a month so that we can help each other become peaceable people."

For further information, see: **www.ipj-ppj.org** [1]

* * * * * *

This week, John Dear will be in Boston Wednesday to receive the "Courage of Conscience" award from the Peace Abbey [2], and speak Thursday at St. Rose of Lima parish near Worcester, and Friday at Wisdom House in Litchfield, Conn. His latest books, *A Persistent Peace* and Put Down Your Sword are available from www.amazon.com. For details, see: www.johndear.org.

Source URL (retrieved on *09/01/2015 - 15:25*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/road-peace/unless-grain-falls

Links:

[1] http://www.ipj-ppj.org

[2] http://www.peaceabbey.org/index.html