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

Christmas in Gaza

John Dear | Dec. 22, 2009 On the Road to Peace

> *Into this world, this demented inn, in which there is absolutely no room for him at all, Christ has come uninvited. But because he cannot be at home in it, because he is out of place in it, and yet he must be in it, his place is with those others for whom there is no room. His place is with those who do not belong, who are rejected by power, because they are regarded as weak, those who are discredited, who are denied the status of persons, tortured, exterminated. With those for whom there is no room, Christ is present.* -- Thomas Merton

In the true spirit of Christmas, on Christmas day I'll leave for Gaza to join some 1,300 people from 40 nations -- as well as an expected 50,000 Palestinians -- and together undertake a nonviolent march to the Erez northern border crossing leading into Israel. We'll arrive on the first anniversary of the diabolical Israeli bombing attack in which 1,400 Palestinians perished, the vast majority civilians.

The journey represents my attempt to break through the commercialism and sentimentality of Christmas. By this journey I?m trying, in a modest way, to enter the Gospel story itself, mindful that Christmas celebrates the God of peace having come to the poor, having emerged from among the poor. God emerged from among the marginalized, the homeless, the refugees, the outcast, the occupied, the targeted peoples of the world. I journey in the Christmas hope that "peace on earth" comes first of all in places like Gaza.

A million and a half people suffer in the besieged Gaza Strip, centerpiece of Israel's apartheid, in effect, the world's largest prison. Behind the checkpoints and walls, the people seethe and suffer and practically starve. And a year ago the misery was compounded when Israel's U.S.-made fighter jets took to the air and bombed the entrapped. It stopped only in recognition of a new American president. But the war and apartheid continue, and funding backed by the Obama administration makes it all possible.

So on Dec. 31, God willing, we will head out from Izbet Abed Rabbo, where bombing turned the place to rubble, including houses in which civilians huddled. And we'll head toward Erez, the northern checkpoint into Israel. It's a route meant to highlight Israel's responsibility for the siege, a point made clear by the UN-commissioned Goldstone report, which placed responsibility on Israel for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

At the same time, as we march, Palestinian and Jewish groups will march in solidarity to the checkpoint from the Israeli side. Other solidarity actions are planned in the West Bank and in Israeli cities. We will nudge our way as close as possible to the checkpoint without prompting a violent response. At our destination we'll release balloons, lift kites, and unfurl flags, and let the activists on the other side see we're there and we care.

Since January 2009, several international campaigns have organized attempted approaches to Gaza. The Free Gaza Movement sailed a small flotilla to Gaza. A second attempt in the summer, with Nobel Peace Prize winner Mairead Maguire aboard, was thwarted.

Our Christmas event, chiefly organized in the U.S. by CODEPINK, is called ?the Gaza Freedom March.? And we will trudge the wilderness to show the residents of Gaza that the international community has not forgotten them -- and more, to call worldwide attention to the ongoing humanitarian crisis. We will attract global attention in the hopes that Israel will open borders at last and allow Palestinian self-determination.

I?ll fly to Gaza on Christmas, pondering the world?s reality, a brand new president, but same old global crises, the weapons industry still churning , the wars still grinding away. On the other hand, Christmas heralds the Christ who stands with the oppressed of the world, who comes not to dominate but to liberate, not to use violence but to love everyone, enemies included. The unarmed Christ offers the gift of peace and demonstrates how to make peace in a world of war. In Gaza and Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, Haiti and Darfur, on deathrow and in shelters, Jesus dies and rises each day. But the invitation to peace remains.

As his followers, we are called to follow him on his journey, to join the struggle of peace work. The grace of Christmas is a perennially new invitation to enter his story and make it our own. Which implies a promise. The wherewithal is ours to turn from the world's riches and honors and toward the trampled and the poor, the homeless and uninvited, the bombed and segregated. Christmas bids us to be people of goodwill who welcome the gift of "peace on earth." Especially in places like Gaza.

As we celebrate this great feast, I send Christmas blessings of peace and love to you who read my little column. To you who struggle for disarmament and side with the poor. To you who hope and pray for a world without war. And I ask your prayers for our march in Gaza, that it may bear the good fruit of peace. Please pray that the war on Palestine -- and U.S. military aid -- will end, and with it, our others wars in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and elsewhere. May all welcome Christ and help him feel at home among us, that the wars may end once and for all, and redemptive goodwill will spread far and wide.

May Christ be present to us this Christmas, and bless our work for peace in the coming year. God bless us, every one!

For more information, see www.gazafreedommarch.org. Follow it on Twitter with the hashtag #GFM.

****

John?s book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings*, has just been published by Orbis Books. With other recent books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down the Sword*, along with Patricia Normile?s *John Dear On Peace*, it is available from www.amazon.com. For information, or to schedule a speaking event, visit: www.johndear.org.

Source URL (retrieved on *11/27/2014 - 05:10*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/road-peace/christmas-gaza