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

The abomination of desolation

John Dear | Jul. 13, 2010 On the Road to Peace

> ?When you see the abomination of desolation standing where it should not (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains ??
> (Mk. 13:14; Mt. 24:15; Lk. 21:20)

Often when I ponder the violence of our times, the apocalyptic words of Jesus flood my mind. Here is Jesus, not talking in parable, but about sobering historical reality. He is warning his disciples about Jerusalem?s coming destruction at the hands of the juggernaut Roman army.

The walls razed, citizens betrayed by citizens, hold-outs to the Roman cult imprisoned and executed. The time is coming, Jesus said. Be watchful and faithful. Be careful and prayerful. And be nonviolent -- refuse to join the armed revolt. But when the Roman standard hangs in the sanctuary of the Temple, as the prophet Daniel predicted, the time has come to flee.

I think of this when I see an American flag in a Catholic church. How far we?ve strayed from the Gospel understanding of prayer, discipleship and empire, I realize. The Gospels have warned us, yet we welcome the symbols of empire and internalize its spirituality. And our consciences come undone. We confuse God and empire; in our darkness we bless empire?s injustices and war.

The flagpole and the tabernacle side by side -- it?s a sight that bears an implicit but false idea: ?God is on America? side.? Mark, in his own context, says quite the opposite: ?When you see the abomination of desolation standing where it should not?flee.? One presumes even God might flee the premises.

These musings of mine intensified last week when I heard that Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal signed a law allowing guns in church. As if the Katrina recovery and the BP spill doesn?t require the governor?s full attention. But church lobbyists have been pressuring the governor and state legislators. Lobbyists want well-armed security guards to make churches ?more secure.?

No surprise really that a governor would enact such a law. It?s a cultural norm that governors -- presidents and all the functionaries of empire -- must shore up the pillars of culture, which in all times and places are erected on violence. And if they can get faith communities on their side, all the better. It won?t do to have churches taking on a prophetic role: preaching that God?s ways are true but imperial ways lead to destruction. To stave that off, the functionaries flash their beguiling serpent?s smile. ?Assume our ways. We care, we?ll be your guide; we?ll make you more secure.?

Guns in church -- I have personal experience in just that thing. It was during my first month in one of my New Mexican parishes. I preached in the name of Jesus against the Iraq war, against violence and guns. And I made a point closer to home. We mustn?t as Christians take part in the work of Los Alamos, where they design and produce some parts of nuclear bombs. After church a parishioner approached me, her face florid. ?What?? she cried. ?Are you saying we can?t support the war in Iraq? That we can?t have guns?? Then she pointed out a contradiction. ?What about the policeman who comes to Mass with his gun. What do you have to say about that??

She made the connection quickly, and I couldn?t help but be impressed. She was right. At every 5:00 Mass on Saturday afternoon our friendly policeman, a faithful Catholic, arrived and stood in the doorway of our little sanctuary. He stopped for an hour while still on duty, his only opportunity to attend Mass. And he arrived armed to the teeth. A baton and a pistol hung from his belt.

They were a problem. And so a week or so earlier, I gathered my courage and welcomed him warmly and offered him whatever services I could. Then I added, would you please not bring your gun to church? Would you mind leaving it in your truck? We?re a house of prayer, love and peace, I said. We want all to feel safe.

He thought a moment then agreed. When I told my angry parishioner that I had already tended to the matter, there would be no more firearms in church, her countenance grew even angrier and she stormed off. Apparently her anger didn?t stem from what she perceived as lack of parity. She had given herself over to imperial ways. What put her over the top was the idea of Gospel nonviolence itself.

> ?When you see the abomination of desolation standing where it should not (let the reader understand) ... flee!?

I sometimes wonder if I?ve taken Mark?s directive too literally. I took up residence years ago on a remote mesa in the high desert at the southern edge of the Rocky Mountains of northern New Mexico. Wherever I go, I see the abomination of desolation, and I?ve fled to the hills. And I?m not the only one. A handful of others live there too. My neighbor Ira, for example, who lives 3 miles away, right on the edge of the cliff overlooking the Galisteo Basin. A retired jazz musician from New York and Chicago, he?s played with all the greats. He came here a few years ago to enjoy the peace and quiet.

But even our remote mesa isn?t far enough away for him. I ran into him the other day and his rant began. He nearly exploded. ?I?ve had it. This is the end of the country. No one seems to get it. It?s all going to collapse.? What had ignited his combustible heart was the draconian immigrant law just passed in Arizona. ?We?re bankrupting ourselves with these futile wars. Our banks run Wall Street. The media won?t put one word of truth on the air.?

It was clear he had rehearsed his litany in his mind. And all I could do was nod now and then. ?Our inner cities are a barren wasteland, from Los Angeles to Detroit. Our young people have no future. We?re destroying the earth and the sky and the ocean.?

His despair did not seem farfetched. He talked about our cultural slide into fascism, our incorrigible violence disgruntling the whole world and increasing the threat of a retaliatory terrorist attack. ?Then what will we do -- launch nukes??

Five years, that?s all he gives us before the great American collapse. And he doesn?t intend to be here to witness it. ?I?m leaving. My wife and I are moving to Brazil.?

You think I?m apocalyptically gloomy, meet Ira. He?s as sane and reasonable as anyone, and that?s what makes his dark assessment so sobering. Here?s a free thinker daring to say what is generally forbidden and, in a public setting, would be widely ridiculed. But as I listened, I couldn?t help but nod. And I found myself identifying with Jesus? disciples, stones in their stomachs, as Jesus explained their bleak future:

> "For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs. As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to councils. ..." (Mark 13:8-9)

I, too, read the papers and reflect on our predicament, and I wonder if Ira is right on target. So many of us are stuck with no way out. The world scoffs at the very idea of nonviolence. And in the air lurks a sense of doom. Ira has smelled the air, and he decided to flee. The New Mexican desert isn?t remote enough for him. He and his wife are headed for a remote corner of the world, there to lose themselves among the poor, far away from the juggernaut U.S. Perhaps even that isn?t far enough, but I wish him well.

At the same time I suffer the common plight of those who watch others size up the situation and decide to bail out. Painful questions prey on my mind. What to do in a terminal era of war? An era in which injustice is deemed virtue? In which huge careening corporations go on an apocalyptic rampage across the earth and take the common worker under, and the pristine earth as well? What will become of our faith communities if we don?t learn to withdraw our faith in weapons and empire? Will the fragile nonviolence of Jesus manage to survive?

In this culture, such questions are all but forbidden. They seem to languish in the summer heat. But we are not bereft. We can turn, still, in prayer to God. We can redouble our efforts to be loving, nonviolent and compassionate. We can help others as best we can. And we can grow bold enough to deride our former trust in weapons and empire. Our hope lies in the God of peace, who is, as the Psalms declare, our shelter, our rock, our hope.

In that faith, some of us are gearing up to go to Los Alamos on July 31st to mark the 65th anniversary of Hiroshima by sitting in silent prayer, sackcloth and ashes to repent of the mortal sin of war and nuclear weapons. Others of us are also preparing to stand trial in Las Vegas on September 14th for last year?s protest against the drones at Creech AFB. So we go forward, with faith, hope and love, as best we can.

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To contribute to Catholic Relief Services? ?Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund,? go to: http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn. John will teach a weeklong course, ?Gandhi, King, Day and Merton,? Aug. 2-6, at Ghost Ranch Center, Abiquiu, N.M., (see www.ghostranch.org.) John?s latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), along with other recent books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down Your Sword*, as well as Patricia Normile?s *John Dear On Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com. For further information, or to schedule a lecture, go to www.johndear.org.

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