

Don't forget 'Food For The Poor'

John Dear | Nov. 16, 2010 On the Road to Peace

Most days, I can't escape the media hype about our inglorious, immoral institutions which glorify the Almighty dollar or the Almighty bomb -- evil entities such as Lockheed Martin, Goldman Sachs, BP, Northrop Grumman, Bear Stearns, Lehman, Raytheon, Livermore Labs, the CIA, Blackwater, Los Alamos Labs, and countless other behemoths.

The culture seems to celebrate these institutions as our highest aspiration -- the gold standard of goodness and godliness.

So it was enormously refreshing to spend a day last week near Miami, Fla., with 300 staff members at the headquarters of Food For the Poor, an interdenominational Christian relief and development organization directed by Robin Mahfood.

I was there to lead a day of reflection on Jesus and Gospel nonviolence, but it was I who learned so much about their good works of mercy and charity and their full court press to fulfill the mandate of Matthew 25: "When I was hungry, you fed me."

During my talks I spoke of the Beatitudes, the Sermon on the Mount, and the command to "love our enemies" in Matthew 5. It's in those passages that we see the full spectrum of Jesus' politically incorrect vision -- that war not only makes people hungry, thirsty, homeless, sick, and imprisoned. It bombs them, vaporizes them, and kills them.

Jesus wants us to reverse the world's rush to war and greed, love universally, and spend our lives healing humanity by meeting the needs of our suffering sisters and brothers.

For a day we discussed this Gospel vision of renouncing the culture's wars and greed to embrace Christ's vision of universal, nonviolent love. It was like hearing again that beautiful line from Tennyson: "Come my friends, it's not too late to seek a newer world."

Food For the Poor works in 17 countries in the Caribbean and Latin America to assist the poorest of the poor. They collaborate with pastors, missionaries and local churches to bring immediate relief to those in most need. Robin told me they feed two million people a day, six days a week.

They feed millions -- an astounding achievement on its own -- and do much more. They drill wells for drinking water; provide medical care; build homes for homeless families; provide skills training and micro-enterprise opportunities to offer work; and give children an education.

Since 1982, the organization estimates that they have distributed approximately 52,000 massive containers of aid to the poor, built more than 61,200 housing units, and completed more than 1,000 water projects for plumbing and sanitation. Last year alone they shipped 3,324 containers of aid and built 6,371 new housing units.

From the start, they have provided more than \$7.3 billion in aid. They now raise annually about \$100 million in cash for food and \$1.2 billion in goods that are delivered to the poor, Robin told me.

Meanwhile their administrative costs are less than 4 percent of their expenses which means 96 percent of all donations go directly to programs that help the poor. In a survey of the 200 largest U.S. charities, *Forbes* magazine recently gave Food For the Poor outstanding ratings of 98 percent in charitable commitment and 98 percent in fundraising efficiency. The organization also received the highest possible awards from two organizations which evaluate American charities -- four stars from Charity Navigator, and five stars from Ministry Watch. This month the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* ranked Food For the Poor as the third largest international relief organization in the U.S. and the fifth largest overall charity in the nation.

This great work is all the more amazing when one considers how Food For the Poor began as a small family project in Jamaica. Robin, his brother Ferdinand, and Ferdinand's wife Patty founded the agency in 1982. Ferdinand served for years as the first director. Robin succeeded him. They now have 1,200 on staff, with 300 in their Florida headquarters.

The staff includes 85 priests who travel and preach on Sundays in parishes around the United States to raise funds. (If you're looking for a way to help, invite a Food For the Poor priest to come to your parish to preach at the Masses and raise funds.)

"Our mission is to turn the face of the church here in the U.S. to the Third World," Robin told me.

"We want to link the church of the First World with the church of the Third World in a manner that helps both the materially poor and the poor in spirit," Robin wrote in a recent appeal. "Our ministry is shaped by the belief that Christ is alive and can be served directly by serving those in greatest need. Ultimately, we seek to bring both benefactors and recipients to a closer union with our Lord."

I am heartened to know of these good works, and am eager to support them. It was uplifting to be with good people running an organization whose primary purpose is to relieve the needs of suffering people. There should be many such organizations, even as we press the government to abandon its wars and weapons and release its billions to end extreme poverty worldwide. Would that every Christian would join the campaign to feed the hungry, serve the poor, give to those in need and create justice.

Certainly this effort is central to Gospel peacemaking. In the Gospel we hear this cry over and over again. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus teaches us to serve those stuck in the ditch (Luke 10:29). In Luke 14, he urges us to throw dinners parties -- "for the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind."

Says Jesus: "Blessed will you be because of their inability to repay you," (14:14).

In Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount, set on a plain, Jesus adds, "and lend expecting nothing back; then your reward will be great and you will be called sons and daughters of the Most High for God is kind to the ungrateful and wicked." (Lk. 6:35)

This exhortation comes in the same sentence where Jesus commands us to love our enemies.

"Sell your possessions and give alms," Jesus says (Luke 12:33). "Provide money bags for yourselves that do not wear out, an inexhaustible treasure in heaven that no thief can reach nor moth destroy."

In the parable of the rich fool, Jesus describes a man who builds bigger and bigger barns, so he can "eat, drink and be merry" for the rest of his long life; instead he dies that night (Lk. 12:16) "Thus it will be for one who

stores up treasure for himself but is not rich in what matters to God.?(Luke 12:21)

Perhaps the most shocking tale in all the Gospels is the parable of the Lazarus begging at the rich man's doorstep. After both Lazarus and the rich man die, Lazarus goes to heaven because he was poor, while the rich man goes to hell because he did nothing to relieve the suffering of Lazarus (Luke 16: 29).

As the richest nation in the world, we have millions of dying Lazaruses at our doorstep -- from Haiti and Jamaica to Mexico and Guatemala. We were especially mindful of Haiti during our retreat day, as Hurricane Tomas threatened more havoc and the cholera epidemic spreads.

Food For the Poor has a long history of service in Haiti. Robin told me that this year alone they have built 2,504 homes with plumbing in Haiti and have helped thirty villages develop fishing industries. In the last three years, they have planted more than 335,000 fruit trees in Haiti and Jamaica.

The Gospel demands everything of us. We are to give alms and meet the needs of the poor. Likewise, we must seek justice and make peace, and so, must seek to change the systems and structures which create poverty and kill people.

As we make these Gospel connections we pursue disarmament, universal love, boundless compassion and visionary nonviolence so that instead of spending billions on war and weapons, we spend our resources on food, housing, education, medicine, and jobs so that everyone on earth can live in justice, dignity and peace.

At Food For the Poor they do what they can to serve the starving Christ-Lazarus at our doorstep. As our economy worsens and our nation's wars and Wall Street greed continue, the needs of the world's poor increase.

There are many good groups to support with almsgiving, beginning with our local soup kitchen, food bank, homeless shelter, Catholic Worker house and peace group.

After my day in Florida, I also recommend Food For the Poor. By helping them, we help serve Lazarus at our doorstep. In the process, we turn our face to the Third World church. Maybe those in the church there will teach us a thing or two and heal us.

For further information see: www.foodforthe poor.org

John will preach this Saturday at the memorial for Ted Gordon in Gaithersburg, Md. His collection of the writings of Nobel Laureate Mairead Maguire, *The Vision of Peace*, has just been republished by www.wipfandstock.com. John's new book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), and 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. To contribute to Catholic Relief Services' Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund, go to: <http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn>. For further information, or to schedule a lecture or retreat, visit: www.johndear.org.

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