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

Revenge is not the way

John Dear | May. 3, 2011 On the Road to Peace

I had just finished a weekend retreat on the Sermon on the Mount in Los Angeles when I heard the news that the U.S. had killed Osama bin Laden. Unlike the president, the U.S. military, and the hundreds who cheered and waved flags, I did not celebrate. I do not support or cheer the killing of anyone. As a Christian, I am not allowed to retaliate, seek revenge or to kill. I?m supposed to love enemies, do good to those who hate, and bless those who persecute. This news only leads me further into grief, prayer and repentance.

It had been a stimulating weekend. We spent three days reading the Gospel of Matthew, chapters 5-7, line by line. There we discovered that Jesus is clear, consistent and insistent about creative nonviolence: ?Blessed are the peacemakers. Offer no violent resistance to one who does evil. When someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn and offer the other cheek. Love your enemies and pray for your persecutors. Do not judge. Forgive and you will be forgiven. Seek first God?s reign and God?s justice.?

We could not find one instance where Jesus waffles on nonviolence. He never says, ?However, if your enemies are particularly vile, kill them all.? He does not offer a set of conditions to justify warfare. He commands universal, nonviolent love. He goes even further in his politics of peace to argue for this unusual practice because, he says, it is the very nature of God. Then you will be sons and daughters of God ?who makes the sun rise on the bad and the good and causes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust,? he announces.

Many in our group expressed bewilderment at such teachings. It felt to some like a crash course in Mandarin. Too challenging, too hard, too impractical, too scary! they said over and over.

These are the basic guidelines for Christian conduct in the world, I replied. Following these teachings, Christians reject violence, vengeance, retaliation, war, and killing, and instead practice universal love, boundless compassion, generous forgiveness and persistent peacemaking. Even if other Christians reject Jesus? nonviolence and parade around like wolves in sheep?s clothing, I suggested, we are still summoned to walk this narrow path.

Gandhi took these words to heart, I pointed out. He is one of those rare figures who read from the Sermon on the Mount every day for many decades to strengthen his nonviolence and satyagraha.

?Those who live by the sword will die by the sword,? Jesus told his disciples the night before he was assassinated. Violence in response to violence only leads to further violence, he taught. Retaliatory violence will not break the downward spiral of violence. It will only fan the flames of hatred and war. Active nonviolence breaks the cycle of violence. Nonviolently resist those who do evil; don?t become like them. Create justice for everyone and you will reap a great harvest of peace.

I think Jesus? teachings on the futility of retaliatory violence and the possibilities of active nonviolence have long ago been proven true. Our wars, our weapons, our state terrorism have not brought peace. The U.S. assassination of bin Laden, like the death of Saddam Hussein, will not end terrorism or bring peace. It will only inspire further violence, and bring new terrorist attacks against us.

Bombing and killing civilians in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan only fuels the spiral of violence and inspires a new generation to retaliate against us. Jesus was right. Stop killing people, treat people nonviolently, and you will have a better chance of being treated nonviolently too.

But who follows these teachings anymore? Very few. We have twisted Christianity so that God will bless our wars. If Osama bin Laden did not represent true Islam and the All-Merciful One, neither do George W. Bush or Barack Obama represent true Christianity and the nonviolent Jesus.

In fact, Al Qaeda and the Pentagon are two sides of the same coin. In the end, both spend their resources trying to kill, and end up killing innocent civilians. If Osama bin Laden was guilty of killing innocent civilians, so are George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Barak Obama and Hillary Clinton guilty of killing innocent civilians. But the truth is that the U.S. military has killed many more people -- millions more -- than Al Qaeda. Both need to be stopped and dismantled.

The U.S. should immediately end its evil wars in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and Libya, bring all its troops home, dismantle its nuclear weapons, close its military bases, feed the world?s poor, and institutionalize nonviolent, non-military methods of resolving global conflict. Its method of global domination and imperial policing has utterly failed. The cheering crowds outside the White House after Obama?s announcement symbolize our failure to make peace. Instead, we too are caught up in the contagion of bloodlust, violence and revenge.

I urge Christians everywhere to repent of the sin of war, quit the U.S. military and return to the Way and Wisdom of the Sermon on the Mount. Just as many Muslims are reclaiming their call to practice nonviolence, so too we Christians need to reclaim the mission of creative nonviolence and peacemaking which Jesus demands.

As I write these reflections, I've been recalling my own experience with Sept. 11, 2001. My parents were visiting me in Manhattan that weekend. We had planned to have breakfast that morning in ?Windows on the World,? the restaurant at the top of the World Trade Center. A few days before, they changed those plans and we had breakfast instead at their hotel. That morning, I walked from the Upper West Side to Ground Zero to volunteer my services. Within days, the Red Cross asked me to help coordinate all the chaplains ministering to the grieving relatives at the Family Assistance Center. I also ministered to hundreds of rescue workers at Ground Zero. From day one, I also spoke out against U.S. warmaking in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In our daily briefings with hundreds of chaplains, I often asked if they heard any talk of vengeance. No, I was repeatedly told. Instead, we all heard words of sorrow and hopes for peace. ?My son would never want anyone killed in retaliation for his death,? several parents told me.

One Catholic mother who lost her son told me that bombing Afghanistan would not bring her dead son back; it would only increase her grief. She said she had been pondering the sorrow of the parents of the hijackers. With the war in Afghanistan, she now felt new sorrow for the relatives of the people we killed in Afghanistan. That, for me, was the compassionate response which Jesus teaches.

?Live at peace with everyone,? we read in the letter to the Romans. ?Do not look for revenge ? Rather, if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink, for by doing so, you will heap burning coals upon his head. Do not be conquered by evil but conquer evil with good.?

President Obama closed his Sunday night speech announcing the murder of Osama bin Laden by invoking God and God?s blessing. Do not believe him. God does not bless war or warmakers. If we want God?s blessing, we have to become peacemakers. We have to end our wars, dismantle our weapons, renounce state terrorism, and develop a new nonviolent foreign policy that reflects universal love and true justice for the world?s poor.

When we decide that retaliatory violence and war do not work, and finally take up the wisdom of the Sermon on the Mount, then the God of peace will bless us. Until then, we will remain stuck in the downward spiral of violence and war.

Let us pray to the God of peace for a new spirit of universal love and creative nonviolence, that the days of vengeance, assassination, drone attacks, nuclear terrorism and war will soon end and a new day of peace will dawn.

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To hear a recent podcast interview with John, go to www.jesusradicals.com. His latest 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. John?s teachings on Gospel nonviolence are featured in the DVD film ?The Narrow Path,? available at www.sandamianofoundation.org. 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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