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ROTC at Loyola University

John Dear | Sep. 13, 2011 On the Road to Peace

A few weeks ago, I came across the latest issue of the alumni magazine of Loyola University in Baltimore, Maryland. On the cover we see the back of a young ROTC student cadet wearing her military fatigues, and the title, **??Til the Battle?s Over.?** **[1]** The lead article features some of the many young Catholics that this Jesuit school trains for war. This issue of the magazine is a disgrace. But so is the presence of the U.S. military at any so-called Christian institution.

What else is new? Most Catholic, Jesuit, Christian universities in the U.S. take millions of dollars from the Pentagon to train students for war -- and then call ROTC a ?student? organization. In doing so, they serve the U.S. war machine and betray the Gospel of peace. They present fine rationale about having intellectual soldiers who will wage ?better? wars -- but they can never quite claim that they are doing God?s will, obeying the Gospel, or following the nonviolent Jesus.

What caught my particular attention this time was the news that each May at Loyola, the ROTC cadets profess their oath to uphold the U.S. Constitution (if necessary by killing all our enemies), not in an auditorium, but in the university?s Alumni Memorial Chapel in front of the Blessed Sacrament. I consider this plain, old fashioned blasphemy. Here?s an excerpt:

"It?s the day before commencement. Thirteen ROTC cadets march into Alumni Memorial Chapel as ?The Battle Hymn of the Republic? plays. Flanked by family and friends, each member of the ROTC reflects a deep pride. Standing on the altar, the newly commissioned officers take an oath to the Constitution of the United States. ?This oath is an ideal and unlike any others,? Lieutenant Colonel Steven Carroll, chair of Loyola?s military science department, tells them.

With more than 90 cadets, ROTC is one of the largest student organizations on campus. On Tuesdays and Thursdays the students wear their uniforms as they go to classes and participate in daily student life. In recent years, at Commencement, the longest applause has been given when the newly commissioned ROTC cadets are introduced."

?St. Ignatius was a soldier,? one student, Christel Sacco, says, explaining why she joined ROTC at a Jesuit university. ?A lot of people don?t put two and two together.? I thought the whole point of St. Ignatius? life was his renunciation of militarism. He stayed up in prayer all night in a church, and placed his sword below a statue of Mary to begin his new life of Gospel nonviolence. It was precisely his conversion away from militarism that led to the Society of Jesus, his life of mystical prayer, and his call to service.

?If you think about it, the goal of war is peace,? Sacco continues. ?I joined the military to bring peace to the nations we?re at war with, to bring justice and legitimacy to the people who are there now.? ?It?s the soldier who above all desires peace,? Carroll explains. I disagree. As Gandhi taught the means are the ends; the only way to peace is through peaceful means, not warfare.

A lot of people don?t put two and two together. Despite the rhetoric, it appears to me that these students are not

critical thinkers, that they?re very naïve, and that they have not been taught the Gospel. Here?s an excerpt from the lead editorial by Loyola?s Jesuit president, Brian Linnane:

> We hold our ROTC commissioning ceremony each May in our Alumni Memorial Chapel. Some would argue than an ROTC battalion has no place on a Catholic campus, least of all in its chapel. The truth is, however, that the Roman Catholic tradition has never been one of unqualified pacifism. St. Augustine grappled with this issue in the fifth century, finding that there is just too much evil in our world, and that Catholics have an obligation to defend the innocent against aggression.
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> Indeed, it is perhaps particularly fitting that we hold this ceremony in a chapel of the Roman Catholic Church, a church whose ideals have been challenged throughout history. The men and women who take their oaths in this ceremony swear to protect an idea ? the United States Constitution ? that has also faced opposition throughout its existence. But without its existence, without its protection, without the defense provided by our military, the right of Catholics to hold our beliefs dear becomes instantly vulnerable?
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> The education we offer at Loyola aims to help these ROTC officers, and all of our students, become leaders with care and concern for society. We help students see themselves as members of a larger community, both locally and globally ? We endeavor ? to provide our students with an experience that will guide them and inspire them for the rest of their lives. In the officers commissioned through Loyola ROTC, you see the impact of that experience brought to life, ready to change and better the world -- for all of us.

Many people have written elsewhere far better than me about why ROTC does not belong on a Christian campus. I simply submit that Fr. Linnane and his military friends are misguided. The church, for example, was at one time all about unqualified pacifism -- in the first three centuries. Then Constantine and later Augustine led the formal rejection of the Sermon on the Mount and turned to the pagan Cicero to justify mass murder for one?s empire.

Gospel peacemaking, also, is not about passivity, but about actively confronting injustice everywhere through nonviolent means, and digging out the root causes of war. The tired argument of educating elite officers in the Jesuit tradition has been used for more than 60 years, and does not hold up. With the hundreds of thousands of Jesuit educated officers, we still wage war, kill people, and lead the world to the brink. We are not making the world better; we?re making it worse.

And if supporting ?the right of Catholics to hold our beliefs dear? is the goal -- what about the Catholics of Iraq, Palestine, Afghanistan, and Libya? When we train our young for war, we send them off to kill our brother and sister Catholics. I remember when I met the Cardinal of Baghdad in 1999, how he broke down sobbing over how U.S. Catholics kill Iraqi Catholics. The universality of the church, the global Body of Christ, is reason enough to outlaw ROTC and the U.S. military from any Catholic campus. We do not want one of our students hurting any other Catholic or Christian (or anyone!) anywhere.

Millions of Christians reject the lies of war. They know that war and preparing for war do not make us safer or sow the seeds of peace. It can?t end terrorism because it is terrorism. War certainly, hasn?t helped our economy or the environment or our health. As the world is learning, there are many creative nonviolent ways to solve international conflict.

But I am scandalized that a supposedly Christian institution so blatantly rejects the teachings of the nonviolent Jesus -- ?Love one another. Blessed are the peacemakers. Offer no violent resistance to one who does evil. Put down the sword. Love your enemies.? Loyola and other Christian universities can no longer claim to be teaching the Gospel of Jesus.

I consider the ROTC commissioning service held every year in the Alumni Memorial Chapel in front of the Blessed Sacrament to be blasphemous.

In particular, the oath which the cadets take is in direct violation of the Sermon on the Mount. It pledges that if necessary, they will kill any enemies of our nation.

It reads: ?I, having been appointed an officer in the Army of the United States, do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic, that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter, so help me God.?

The early church did not allow the profession of any such idolatrous oaths, especially to the Roman military. It taught that one?s baptism meant your faith and allegiance belonged solely to the nonviolent Jesus.

The ROTC oath is a pledge to kill the enemies of the United States; Jesus, on the other hand, commands us to love them. Only then, he announces, will we be ?sons and daughters of our heavenly God who makes the sun shine on the good and the bad and the rain to fall on the just and the unjust.? The ROTC oath, professed in the Loyola chapel, mocks the God of peace.

I urge Loyola University to cancel those ceremonies, close its ROTC program, teach nonviolent conflict resolution and the nonviolence of Jesus, and ?study war no more.? In the name of the nonviolent Jesus, I invite every Loyola student in ROTC, and every student in any U.S. ROTC program, to quit immediately and follow the nonviolent Jesus on the road to peace.

And I invite people from around the world to write nonviolent letters to Fr. Linnane, Loyola University and their Alumni magazine, to share thoughts about the way of peace and Loyola?s commissioning ceremony in the university chapel (Office of the President, Loyola University, 4501 North Charles St., Baltimore, MD 21212). If plans continue for the commissioning service to be held May 2012, in the chapel, I invite everyone to join me in a peaceful protest. Perhaps we can profess the Pax Christi vow of nonviolence as a witness. Or nonviolently disrupt their unholy ceremony.

Many have told me that the disarmament of our universities is no longer possible, that the culture of war has infiltrated every aspect of civil society, that it?s not possible to have a Catholic campus for peace.

But I remember my experience in El Salvador in the 1980s at the Jesuit-run University of Central America. The Jesuits turned that campus into a training camp for justice and peace. Every class, every lecture, every program was aimed at ending the war and transforming El Salvador. The steadfast determination of the Jesuits made that university an unparalleled anti-war center. The entire university became such a threat to the culture of war that inevitably, U.S.-backed government death squads killed the president and five other Jesuits.

That university approached the Christian ideal. That?s what every Catholic and Christian university should become -- a school for peace, a training camp for Gospel nonviolence, where young people are taught how to love enemies, not how to kill them.

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From February-April 2012, John Dear will undertake a national book tour for his forthcoming book, *Lazarus Come Forth!*, which portrays Jesus as the God of life calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. To host John for an evening talk and book-signing at your church,

send an e-mail through www.johndear.org [2]. John's latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), and other recent books 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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[1] http://magazine.loyola.edu/issue/beyond-loyola/2174/all-they-can-be
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