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

Happy 80th, Archbishop Tutu

John Dear | Oct. 4, 2011 On the Road to Peace

Dear Archbishop Tutu,

?Yu, u nobuntu!?

Happy 80th birthday! With friends around the world, I give thanks to the God of love and peace for your extraordinary life, your great courage, your astounding witness and your magnanimous spirit. You give me and millions of others hope.

I send this letter of love and blessing to share my thanks, and the thanks of millions, for your beautiful life and public work for justice and peace, in South Africa and throughout the world. Thank you, too, for all your kindness and support for me. This Friday, Oct. 7, we all celebrate you!

?Yu, u nobuntu!? As I understand it, that?s about the highest praise someone in South Africa can offer another person. It means, you have great *ubuntu*, compassion, generosity, kindness -- humanity! It speaks of the profound humanity in those who treat every person on earth as a full human being.

Some say it means, ?I am because you are.? My translation reads, ?Because you are such a great human being, you show the rest of us what it means to be human!?

That?s you, Archbishop! *?Yu, u nobuntu!?*

We North Americans are not as eloquent as you holy South Africans! We would just say, ?You rock!?

Bono is right when he says you are the greatest living person. I knew that already, but when I read your biography, *Rabble Rouser for Peace* by South African journalist John Allen, I was all the more convinced. Your life reads like a nonviolent, holy, Robert Ludlum thriller -- a life-and-death, roller-coaster ride for justice and peace.

It?s hard for me to comprehend all you have been through -- your work through the 1970s and 1980s with churches throughout Africa; your service to the World Council of Churches, the South African Council of Churches, and as bishop and archbishop; your outspoken stand against the evil apartheid system; your speeches to millions, calling for justice.

The funerals at which you officiated, the marches and prayer vigils you led, your visits to prisoners and their families, your civil disobedience; the times you intervened and saved those about to be killed. The many attacks and death threats against you; your steadfast adherence to nonviolence; your ground-breaking work with the ?Truth and Reconciliation Commission;? your global advocacy for justice with countless causes, individuals and organizations; your exemplary leadership; and throughout all of this your daily prayer, your underlying fidelity, and your radiant peace and joy.

I remember hearing you speak at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. sometime around 1987. It was at the height of apartheid, and the world was waking up to its horrors. You had just come from Soweto, and spoke of an elderly woman you met there. She told you that she got up every night in the middle of the night for one hour to beg God solemnly for an end to apartheid.

?I know we will win now,? you said through your tears, ?because God cannot resist the prayer of that poor old woman.?

God cannot resist you, either. You have done what God wanted. As you have said to others, I say to you: Jesus is very proud of you!

Over the years, you have spoken the truth with love boldly, publicly, tirelessly, steadfastly. Like Archbishop Romero, you have been a voice for the voiceless, a voice for justice and peace, a voice also for forgiveness and reconciliation. You have reclaimed the best of the biblical prophetic tradition, which has been so rejected by the institutional churches. In doing so, you offer us the possibility and hope of a new future.

?This is a moral universe,? you once said, ?which means that despite all the evidence that seems to be to the contrary, there is no way that evil and injustice and oppression and lies can have the last word? That is what has upheld the morale of our people, to know that in the end, good will prevail.?

You learned that lesson from the South African people, and you have shared it with the world. Evil will not triumph; good will prevail. That message of hope remains in short supply and you keep offering it. Thank you.

Because of that truth, you have urged us all to stand up publicly and speak out on behalf of suffering people against injustice, war and tyranny.

?In a situation where human life seems dirt cheap, with people being killed as easily as one swats a fly, we must proclaim that people matter and matter enormously,? you once said. ?To be neutral in a situation of injustice is to have chosen sides already. It is to support the status quo.?

It seems there is not one form of injustice that you have ignored. You refuse to support the unjust global status quo, but also local injustices, the church?s injustices, national injustices. You insist on justice, on new ways of thinking, on new ways of creating society. Because you insist, positive change happens. You make us insist, too.

In particular, you have rightly condemned Israel?s ?apartheid? against the Palestinians and described Israeli blockades of the Gaza Strip as an "abomination.? On a recent visit to the Palestinians, you said, "It reminded me so much of what happened to us black people in South Africa.?

You urged George W. Bush and Tony Blair not to bomb Iraq, and then later asked them to admit they had a made a mistake with this ?immoral war.? Then, you called upon President Obama to apologize to the world, ?especially the Iraqis, for an invasion that has turned out to be an unmitigated disaster.?

I?m grateful, too, that you were willing to go with me to meet Obama privately, shortly after his inauguration, and urge him not to increase the U.S. war on Afghanistan, but instead to end it immediately.

You have consistently pointed out that U.S. bombing raids over Afghanistan will not end terrorism because they are terrorism. Those U.S. attacks only further inspire people to become terrorists. Instead of bombing Afghani children, build schools, homes and hospitals, you have argued.

Alas, if only Obama had your wisdom and willingness to act! It was a sign of things to come that he refused to meet with you to discuss his war. Nonetheless, we continue to call for an end to these wars.

As I write this, thousands are demonstrating in New York City on Wall Street against the evils of corporate greed. I visited them last week after giving a talk nearby at Trinity Church. Thousands are also about to converge on Washington, D.C., on October 6th to mark the tenth anniversary of the U.S. war in Afghanistan. I intend to join them in Lafayette Park, across the street from the White House, to lend my voice to the world?s cry for an end to permanent U.S. war-making.

These are the things you would be doing if you lived here. Your life is litany of nonviolent action and prophetic speeches rooted in steadfast courage.

?Being courageous does not mean never being scared,? you write. ?It means acting as you know you must even though you are undeniably afraid.?

Thank you for standing up over and over again and doing the right thing. You give us the courage to take a stand, too, in our own imperial setting.

In your dream of the ?Rainbow Nation,? you offer a vision not only of a new South Africa, but a new humanity, where everyone is honored, respected and treated justly.

?Instead of separation and division, all distinctions make for a rich diversity to be celebrated for the sake of the unity that underlies them,? you have written. ?We are different so that we can know our need for one another.?

?The essence of *ubuntu*, or ?me we,?? you once wrote, ?could be seen clearly during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings in South Africa in the mid-1990s. Victims forgave their torturers, indeed, even forgave those who, by doing nothing, had supported apartheid. And some perpetrators confessed and asked for forgiveness and were given amnesty. This forgiveness was not about altruism. It was about regaining dignity and humanity and granting these, too, to the former oppressors. This expression of *ubuntu* showed that the only way we can ever be human is together. The only way we can be free is together.?

Thank you for calling us to reclaim our humanity, to share our common humanity, to reach out to one another as sisters and brothers, and to build a new world of peace together.

I send you here the blessing you included in your beautiful collection, *An African Prayer Book*. Take it as a prayer for you, for Africa and for all of us, that the God of peace will continue to bless you on your journey and use you to inspire the rest of us!

> *May God raise you up*
> *above everything.*
> *Spread out like water of a lake.*
> *Be abundance that never ends,*
> *that never changes.*
> *Be like a mountain.*
> *Be like a camel.*
> *Be like a cloud --*
> *a cloud that brings rain always.*
> *And promised that it would be so.*

With every blessing, your friend on the road to peace,

John Dear

***

John Dear?s new book, *Lazarus Come Forth!*, has just been published by Orbis Books. It 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. Next year, John will undertake a national book tour to discuss this confrontation of the God of life and peace against the culture of death and war. To host John for an evening talk and book-signing at your church, send an e-mail through www.johndear.org [1]. John's latest book, and others such as *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), 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.

Source URL (retrieved on 05/06/2015 - 10:37): http://ncronline.org/blogs/road-peace/happy-80th-archbishop-tutu

We can send you an e-mail every time an On the Road to Peace column is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow directions: **E-mail alert sign-up** [2]. If you already receive e-mail alerts from us, click on the "update my profile" button to add On the Road to Peace to your list.

Links:

[1] http://www.johndear.org

[2] http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup