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Speaking for peace with Martin Sheen in Norway

John Dear | Mar. 5, 2013 On the Road to Peace

It's cold and snowy here in Oslo, Norway, but it's thrilling to be here. My friend Martin Sheen and I flew from Los Angeles to Oslo last week to speak at the conference of The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons [1], where we appeared together Saturday night on stage before an energized crowd of 900 people in downtown Oslo. This civic forum on nuclear weapons preceded the global gathering of representatives from more than 130 nations invited here by the government of Norway to discuss the abolition of nuclear weapons. (The U.S. and Britain did not attend.) That formal international gathering began Monday. As far as we can tell, there has never been such a conference before. It's a real sign of hope for the world, and we congratulated the Norwegian government for taking such strong leadership to promote disarmament.

Norway is perhaps the most expensive country in the world, but with its majestic fjords, it's also one of the most beautiful. Having met so many wonderful Norwegians, we can also say they are some of the world's greatest peacemakers.

As I told the crowd, coming here fulfills a lifelong dream. I'm part Norwegian. My beloved grandmother Besta grew up speaking Norwegian and told me many tales of her parents' lives in Norway. They journeyed from Bergen to North Dakota in the late 1890s, where they helped build a church and a little village around it. Besta passed on to me a hearty respect for life, the outdoors and adventure. Being here in Norway feels like coming home.

Martin began by thanking ICAN for their work to build a global abolition movement and encouraged everyone to keep at it. He read aloud their general call:

> We call on states, international organizations, civil society organizations and everyone to acknowledge --
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> -- that any use of nuclear weapons would cause catastrophic humanitarian and environmental harm;
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> -- that there is a universal humanitarian imperative to ban nuclear weapons, even for states that do not possess them;
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> -- that the nuclear-armed states have an obligation to eliminate their nuclear weapons completely;
>
> -- and that we need to take immediate action to support a multilateral process of negotiations for a treaty banning nuclear weapons.

During the evening event, we were interviewed together on stage about our work for peace over the last three decades: how we got involved, what we've done, where we get our energy and what our hopes for peace are. Martin spoke about being in India during the making of the movie "Gandhi" and how that experience led to an awakening of his faith and meeting Dan and Phil Berrigan, who pushed him to work publicly for peace.

Do you know why the movie "Gandhi" was such a success in Hollywood? he asked the crowd. Because Gandhi

is what everyone in Hollywood wants to be -- thin, tan and moral. The audience roared with laughter.

On Sunday and Monday, the leading Norwegian newspapers and television stations interviewed Martin as the international government conference was beginning. Meanwhile, I spoke on a panel, "Ethics in International Politics," with Cardinal John Onaiyekan from Nigeria, who left afterward for the Vatican conclave in Rome. He spoke passionately against war and nuclear weapons and on the need for a deeper spirituality and morality in the world so these weapons could be disarmed. Liv Torres of Norwegian People's Aid urged policymakers in the audience not to wait for the nuclear superpowers but to go ahead and start the process for an international ban on nuclear weapons. I reflected on the need for a new global Gandhian/Christian ethic of nonviolence that would set a standard of using nonviolent means to resolve conflicts instead of resorting to killing, warfare, and weapons of mass destruction.

On Monday morning, the Nobel Peace Center [2] welcomed us for a private tour. We learned more about Alfred Nobel's dream and the many heroes who have won the prize. Later, I took a walking tour of Oslo with student/activist friends and visited the cathedral, Parliament and the main parks.

On Monday evening, we attended a reception with the Norwegian Parliament and were able to encourage many members to carry on their initiative for the abolition of nuclear weapons. We met Norway's foreign minister, the vice president of Parliament, the mayor of Oslo, and many other officials. Martin and I were particularly impressed by one of the founders of the international Physicians for Social Responsibility, who said that for the first time in four decades, he feels hopeful about nuclear disarmament. There has never been such an important gathering in history, he said, and everyone is optimistic that an international ban on nuclear weapons will soon become a reality. The leaders of the Red Cross/Red Crescent, which is very involved in this campaign for peace, hosted a final dinner for us in a 300-year-old legendary Oslo restaurant. Again, we were encouraged by these committed people, working so hard for humanity.

At one point during the ICAN conference, a teenage student asked to speak with me. He confided that he was one of the survivors of the massacre a year and a half ago when that insane shooter killed 78 children during their summer camp on an island in a large lake not far from Oslo. My new friend told me how he dodged the bullets and swam far out into the lake and barely survived. He wanted to talk with me about nonviolence and forgiveness. I encouraged him on his journey of healing toward a deeper peace, and was moved by his connection between the summer camp massacre and the global massacre that can be unleashed through nuclear weapons.

At the international conference, government representatives were challenged to study the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons. They examined three areas: "how any use of nuclear weapons would cause catastrophic humanitarian effects; why the risk of accidents and of proliferation, combined with the enormous stockpiles of nuclear weapons, make these weapons a global humanitarian threat; and how the only viable answer to this global humanitarian threat is an efficient and credible treaty banning nuclear weapons." Norway hopes the conference will lead to a process similar to the processes that led to the ban on landmines in the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty and cluster munitions in the 2008 Convention on Cluster Munitions.

Clearly Martin's presence here has been a big boost to the many longtime activists, scholars, organizers and policymakers who attended the conference from around the world. Because of the nonstop media work, he has been seen and heard everywhere, probably by every Norwegian, encouraging Norway to lead the world toward the abolition of nuclear weapons.

Over these days, we both have fallen in love with Norway and the many great people we have met, especially the university students who hosted us and looked after us. Neither of us has ever attended any gathering like this, led by a government actively pursuing nuclear disarmament.

In his opening speech, Martin quoted from Robert Kennedy's famous 1966 visit to South Africa: "Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance."

This week in Oslo, Martin and I felt those ripples of hope coming from around the world. Let's pray that the work of these Norwegian peacemakers may bring down the walls of fear that support our nuclear weapons industry and that one day, the world will be free of nuclear weapons.

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John Dear will lead a retreat, "Jesus the Peacemaker [3]," April 5-7 in East Stroudsburg, Pa. To see John's speaking schedule for 2013 or to invite him to speak in your church or school, go to John Dear's website [4]. One of John's essays appears in the new book *A Faith Not Worth Fighting For* [5]. His book *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [6] explores 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. John's talk at the 2011 Sabeel conference in Bethlehem is featured in the new book *Challenging Empire* [7]. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* [8] by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* [9], *Put Down Your Sword* [10] and *A Persistent Peace* [11], are available from Amazon.com.

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