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The Unheralded Lesson of Sophie Scholl

John Dear | Mar. 13, 2007 On the Road to Peace

Probably little surprise, but I'm a fan of movies with a message for justice and peace, films such as "Gandhi," "The Mission," "In the Name of the Father," "Missing," "Born on the Fourth of July," "Babette's Feast," "Dead Man Walking," "Erin Brokovich," "Silkwood," "Cry Freedom," "Philadelphia," "North Country," "Testament," "Veronica Guerin," and "Thirteen Days." Seeing that Oscar season is upon us, it occurred to me to give two thumbs up to one of my favorites, "Sophie Scholl."

Sophie who? It's the name of a German film nominated last year for Best Foreign Picture, a film about one of the heroes, saints and martyrs of the last century, a 21-year-old university student in Munich, who with her brother Hans and their medical-student friends formed a nonviolent resistance group called "the White Rose Society." The group undertook to counter Nazi propaganda. They sprayed anti-Nazi graffiti around Munich and distributed outlawed leaflets on the sly.

On Feb. 18, 1943, Sophie and Hans walked onto the University of Munich with a briefcase full of leaflets and moving fast among the empty halls distributed them where students would find them. On the way out, Sophie pushed a stack of leaflets over a balcony. They fluttered down upon the noon-time crowd, and thus gave the pair away. They were arrested and jailed, interrogated and tried -- and upon sentencing nearly immediately beheaded.

Ten years ago, historians discovered the transcripts of the interrogation and trial. The movie recreates the scene, the insidious interrogation, Sophie's artful dodging, and finally one of the most kangaroo of all kangaroo courts -- the Nazi judge conducting the prosecution, the defense lawyers remaining mute, the verdict and sentence a foregone conclusion. From the start, the judge heaped abuse and thundered against her for demoralizing the troops, abetting the enemy, undermining patriotism.

The film, starring Julia Jentsch, is worth tracking down. Study it and pray over it, for it dwells on the human response to a culture of war. It demonstrates the ideal reaction to a culture, like our own, bent on destruction and death. No large leap, then, to imagine that the film pertains to our own warmaking -- in Iraq, Afghanistan, Colombia, Iran and Los Alamos.

The film challenges us to query ourselves: What are we going to do in the face of rapid militarism and blind patriotism? How seriously do we want to follow the nonviolent Jesus? What does courage mean for us? What price are we willing to pay to defend life and uphold God's reign of peace?

The scene in the Nazi courtroom, rooted in sheer evil and blind hatred, chills the blood. Here was a sinister milieu not amenable to putting up a defense. Still, Sophie and Hans stand before their rabid condemners with

great dignity. They denounce state violence. They call the stacked courtroom to renounce their allegiance to the warmaking state and to seek God.

They published boldly in one of their leaflets, "We will not be silent. We are your bad conscience. The White Rose will not leave you in peace." Their boldness refused to dim in court. Sophie turns to the ominous judge, like Stephen before the Sanhedrin, "You will soon be standing where I am now." In return, he explodes with rage, and Sophie, Hans and their friend Christoph receive a sentence of death. They were beheaded within the hour.

Moments before, a sympathetic guard arranged for her a meeting with her parents. Tears flowed, but no condemnation. Instead they hold her and tell her how proud they are; they urge to keep her eyes on Jesus. She thanks them for their bravery, and urges them in return.

Today, with 35 wars being waged, 50,000 children dying of starvation every day, and 25,000 nuclear weapons -- and the environment close to catastrophe -- we wonder what we can do. Sophie and Hans didn't do much; they simply wrote and distributed a few anti-Nazi leaflets. On the other hand, they did everything they could, the most anyone could do; they gave their lives resisting the culture of war. They followed the nonviolent Jesus to the very end.

I wonder how we might aspire to the same heights. Sophie and Hans would summon us, I believe, to join a local peace group, hold peace vigils, distribute leaflets, write letters to the editor, speak out publicly against U.S. warmaking, demand the troops come home now, even commit nonviolent civil disobedience and accept the consequences -- in other words, do what needs to be done, even in the face of no apparent result, but trusting in the goodness of our action, the rightness of our cause, the urgency of public response. Sophie would want us to sow seeds of peace for a future that is not ours, a harvest of peace we may not live to see.

A few months ago, my friend Howard Zinn, the great historian and author of *A People's History of the United States*, visited Santa Fe, and a luncheon was put on in his honor. He had been studying social change for more than 35 years, he said, and he had come to a conclusion. Every U.S. movement for social change -- the abolitionists, suffragists, labor, civil rights, and anti-war movements -- from their beginning, throughout their years, and right up to the very end was ... hopeless. I found this oddly consoling.

He said the key was that ordinary people kept doing ordinary acts of nonviolent resistance every day even when there was absolutely no evidence of any positive outcome. What's more, the one thing those in power feared the most was a movement of ordinary Americans that would not go away.

Great breakthroughs of hope derived from this, he said. Change evolved because ordinary people kept at it. They refused to give up. They did what they could, no matter how small the act. Everyone involved made a difference.

This is the lesson of Sophie Scholl. Her life and witness, along with all the heroes of the White Rose, bore good fruit after all. Their memory urges us to stand up and do what we can to stop the evil U.S. war on Iraq, the unjust occupation of the Palestinians, the criminal bombing of Afghanistan, the lethal funding of Colombian death squads, the demonic maintenance of our nuclear arsenal, and the refusal to feed and serve the starving masses of Africa, Latin America, India and elsewhere.

Every one of us can do something; the nonviolent Jesus calls every one of us to do something for suffering humanity. Sophie Scholl still shines a bright light in a dark world. She inspires courage and urges us to stand with her. I hope and pray that during these dark times, we too can look raw power in the face and insist on truth and peace.

John Dear is currently on a national speaking tour of Australia. His latest book, *Transfiguration*, with a foreword by Archbishop Tutu, just published by Doubleday, is available from **www.amazon.com [1]** or your local bookstore. To order a DVD of the film, "Sophie Scholl," contact Ignatius Press at 1-800-651-1531. For further info, see: www.fatherjohndear.org [2]

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