

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

May 21, 2013 at 1:44pm

50 years on, Birmingham pledge of nonviolence still inspires

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

I've been pondering the 1963 Birmingham campaign, which led to the March on Washington and civil rights legislation, for clues about resisting our ongoing systemic racism, oppression of the poor, corporate greed, global militarism and refusal to fight climate change.

This 50th anniversary reminds me that in the David-and Goliath-like battle that pitted Martin Luther King, Jr., school children and the best of the Civil Rights movement against vicious police Chief Eugene "Bull" Connor, the Ku Klux Klan and white racists ? active nonviolence can transform anything.

We remember how high school and elementary school kids marched by the thousands from the 16th Street Baptist church into Kelly Ingram Park and faced down the fire men, German shepherds and loaded guns. We remember Dr. King's Good Friday arrest, and the document he produced behind bars, one of the most significant in our history, "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." Combined with the economic boycott of downtown white businesses, these public protests ? and the subsequent overcrowded jails, international TV coverage and national outrage ? were too much for the white establishment, and segregation fell.

The climactic moment occurred May 5, 1963, the third day into their "D-Day" children's campaign, when thousands of children marched through the streets right up to the firemen. In the days before, many were brutalized when fire hoses were turned on them. But the youth learned the lessons of Dr. King. "Nonviolent suffering love is always redemptive." "We will match your capacity to inflict suffering with our capacity to accept suffering and we will wear you down until justice comes."

So they came back, asking for more. Bull Connor went ballistic. "Turn on the hoses," he screamed at the

firemen. The marchers knelt in prayer. "We're not turning back," they said. They stood up and walked right toward the firemen.

"It was one of the most fantastic events of the Birmingham story," King later said. "I saw there, I felt there, for the first time, the pride and power of nonviolence."

While Bull Connor screamed and yelled, the white firemen and police officers were overcome by the singing youth. The firemen couldn't bring themselves to hurt the kids again. So they put down the fire hoses. Some of them started crying. The singing youth walked right through them.

Dr. King and the Birmingham resisters did everything Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount. They prove that Jesus' method works. They model the Christian way.

How were those youth able to reach the heights of daring nonviolence? There are many reasons, but first we need to remember that few people in this culture of violence know how to be nonviolent. We're all brainwashed into violence. We have to be trained in nonviolence. And the Birmingham movement worked hard at training everyone in the practice and way of nonviolence. Every participant was required to undergo nonviolence training.

They were also required to sign a pledge of nonviolence written by the Rev. James Lawson. That training and signed commitment, within the context of the strong local and national movement, the brilliant organizing, the willingness to risk jail and death, and the charismatic leadership of Dr. King, channeled the energy of the youth into a contagious force of nonviolence that would wear down even the most hardened white racist and our worst apartheid.

With George Wallace, Bull Connor had come to symbolize the worst of the white Southern establishment. He used violence to defend racism, segregation, killings, bombings, systemic injustice, corporate greed and oppression of the poor. King and his associates went to Birmingham deliberately to provoke Connor's extreme wrath to reveal publicly the depths of racist violence and spark a national transformation through the movement's nonviolent suffering love.

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Fifty years later, Bull Connor and the white Birmingham establishment have become, to my mind, a symbol of our current government, military and corporate leaders, who defend our unjust structure, corporate greed, banks, gun makers, oil companies, weapons manufacturers, and the one percent, while our drones and bombs kill children around the world, and our nuclear weapons and destructive environmental policies threaten us all. The Bull Connor spirit of violence runs our nation and world.

Likewise, the thousands of young activists who committed themselves to nonviolence and marched into the face of the fire hoses symbolize the way forward for any who care enough to struggle for justice and disarmament.

If this analogy holds, then Birmingham of 1963 has become the nation, if not the world. We are on one side or the other. We either side with our Bull Connor government and its lethal ways, or with the grassroots movement of nonviolence that continues to grow around the world.

I think we can choose to live in the spirit of those nonviolent youth, resisting our Bull Connor government and its militaristic, violent, unjust ways, and play our little part in the global grassroots movement of

nonviolence.

One way to do that is to commit ourselves, 50 years later, to the Birmingham pledge of nonviolence and try, as Dr. King urged those young marchers, to make active nonviolence a way of life, so that we will be nonviolent but resist state violence in all his forms, and pursue a vision of transformation that seems, for the moment, impossible.

Here's the original pledge:

I hereby pledge myself ? my person and body ? to the nonviolent movement. Therefore I will keep the following 10 commandments:

1. Meditate daily on the teachings and life of Jesus.
2. Remember always that the nonviolent movement seeks justice and reconciliation, not victory.
3. Walk and talk in the manner of love, for God is love.
4. Pray daily to be used by God in order that all men and women might be free.
5. Sacrifice personal wishes in order that all men and women might be free.
6. Observe with both friend and foe the ordinary rules of courtesy.
7. Seek to perform regular service for others and for the world.
8. Refrain from the violence of fist, tongue, or heart.
9. Strive to be in good spiritual and bodily health.
10. Follow the directions of the movement.

This beautiful pledge of nonviolence offers guide posts for us in our pursuit of the abolition of war, poverty, the death penalty, racism, sexism, corporate greed, catastrophic climate change, and nuclear weapons.

?Meditate. Remember. Walk. Pray. Sacrifice. Observe. Seek. Refrain. Strive. Follow.? If we live in that spirit, then we can help build a global movement that can resist our Bull Connor government and transform our Birmingham world.

The 1963 Birmingham campaign teaches us what happens when everyone pitches in and joins the nonviolent movement. I hope more and more of us can find new strength and energy, perhaps through this pledge of nonviolence, to step out publicly and stay involved in the movements for justice and peace. For as Dr. King teaches and Birmingham demonstrates, with active nonviolence ? and the God of peace ? anything is possible.

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. John is now working with the Franciscan-based peace group Pace e Bene. He is profiled in *Doing Time for Peace* by Rosalie Reigle and with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in *Divine Rebels* by Deena Guzder. John's book *Lazarus, Come Forth!* and other recent books, including Daniel Berrigan: *Essential Writings*, *Put Down Your Sword* and *A Persistent Peace*, are available from Amazon.com.

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