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On the road to peace in Scotland

John Dear | Oct. 1, 2013 On the Road to Peace

Last month, I spent nearly two glorious weeks traveling through Scotland, speaking on peace and nonviolence. Here is a little diary from my journey on the road to peace in Scotland.

Wednesday, Sept. 11: Edinburgh.

I left New York City yesterday after nearly a week with my friend Daniel Berrigan. At 92, he's frail and lives permanently now in the Jesuit infirmary, but his spirit is strong. We drove with Fr. Steve Kelly to Syracuse, N.Y., to visit Dan's older brother, Jerry. Then Steve and I spent the weekend on Block Island, R.I., celebrating the wedding of our friends Barbara and Jim Reale. It was a magnificent occasion, with sunny weather, a cool breeze and great friends from around the country. We took the ferry back to Galilee early Monday morning and spent the rest of Monday again with Dan, reflecting on our lives, our friends and our poor world.

I landed in London and ran across Heathrow through customs and various terminals and barely made my flight to Scotland. I arrived in Edinburgh by noon and went immediately to the BBC Scotland offices, just off the Royal Mile, to record an hourlong interview for their popular national Sunday show, "Sunday Morning with ..." One feature of their program is to play favorite songs of their guests. I requested songs by the Beatles, U2 and Joan Baez. So the show began with Baez's "Blessed Are..." and gave me a chance to talk about her passion for peace.

Later, I walked around Edinburgh, one of my favorite cities, and joined the Jesuits at the Sacred Heart Church community on Lauriston Street, just off the Grassmarket, for dinner. They spoke of the exciting election one year from now, when the Scots have the chance to vote for independence. I hope they will. Independence means the chance, too, to vote against the presence of British nuclear weapons and Trident submarines at Faslane naval base in Scotland.

Part of my reason for coming to Scotland is to encourage activists and church workers across the country to do what they can with this historic opportunity to get rid of nukes and send a signal to the world that the time has come to abolish nuclear weapons.

Tonight, I'm exhausted, but thrilled to be back in Edinburgh. I give thanks for the chance to return here, see friends and speak on the urgent need for disarmament and peace.

Thursday, Sept. 12: Glasgow

Jet lag! I was up early, so I set off for a morning walk on the cobblestoned streets of old Edinburgh. A cool, sunny day. I'm staying in the heart of the old city, just a few blocks from the towering mountain with the majestic castle on top. After a restful morning, I took a train west to Glasgow, where I was met by my friend Dermot Lamb, who organized my trip. Dermot is a longtime justice and peace activist who has worked for decades with SCIAF (Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund, the Catholic development agency in Scotland) and Justice and Peace Scotland, the main sponsors of my speaking tour. He took me to the Jesuit community at

St. Aloysius' College, the large Jesuit elementary and high school in the heart of the city, where I will be staying and speaking.

Tonight, I spoke to a gathering of the Glasgow Catholic Worker at the Craighead Institute. I reflected on Dorothy Day's life, the vision of nonviolence, the witness of Jesus and the historic opportunities at hand. I was so moved by these good people, who do what they can to welcome the stranger, stand up for peace and live Dorothy's Gospel vision. They told me that the main problem in Scotland is apathy, indifference. Why care about the violent world when you live in a peaceful paradise? They struggle each day to break through indifference. The great struggle!

Friday, Sept. 13: Glasgow

A full day. This morning at 9 a.m., I spoke to the 1,300 students and faculty of St. Aloysius' College then afterward to several sections of the junior- and senior-year classes. I was welcomed by Lynn, an ex-pat American who serves as one of the principals. It was a daunting challenge to speak briefly to such a large group of young people, but I did my best. Not sure they could all hear me in the large, magnificent Jesuit church, but afterward, the older students engaged me about the prospects for peace, the reasons for my public stand against war, and what they could do. They seemed interested and engaged, and I hope I inspired them.

It was exciting and nerve-wracking, and then jet lag struck again, so I slept all afternoon. Later, I took a little walk in the city center and enjoyed a quiet evening and delicious meal at the home of Dermot and Sandra, my hosts. I'm so grateful to know these faithful church workers who do what they can to serve God's reign.

Saturday, Sept. 14: Glasgow

Today was the main event -- a peace conference open to the public held at St Aloysius' College, "Blessed are the Peacemakers." I offered three sessions on Jesus and nonviolence, the beatitudes, and the commandments of the Sermon on the Mount. About 65 participants came from around the city and surrounding towns. Most were longtime church workers. I suggested we make it a day of retreat, so it was informal with an emphasis on personal reflection and how our peace Scriptures inspire us.

"Where are you on the road to peace?" I kept asking. "Where is the God of peace in your life? What is God saying to you? How can you go further along the road of peace through creative nonviolence? What can you do to help Scotland become a land of nonviolence, and the world to disarm?"

It was beautiful. Of course, we took up the U.S. threat of war on Syria and agreed this was not the will of the suffering Syrian people or the nonviolent Jesus. In the end, we gathered in a large circle, offered our intercessions, said the Lord's prayer, and gave each other a sign of peace.

Afterward, I walked along the streets of Glasgow, taking in the sights and sounds. But then, all of a sudden, jet lag struck, so I returned to the Jesuit house for a long nap.

Tonight, Dermot took me across town to St. Simon's Catholic Church for dinner with the men's group founded by the wonderful Fr. Willie, who will soon be retiring. These Glasgow men have been meeting for dinner and spiritual conversation every Saturday night for 16 years! A few years ago, during his speaking tour, Fr. Richard Rohr joined them. We laughed and joked over a delicious Bangladeshi meal, and I was moved by the sharing of their lives, the struggles they've been through, and their hopes for the church and the world. Initially they came across as tough Glasgow men, but by the end of the evening, I felt I was in the presence of Scottish kings, those ancient Celtic mythic heroes of wisdom. It made me wish that men across the U.S. would meet weekly for spiritual conversation, sharing and community-building as many women are doing. Perhaps then ,more men might learn to adopt Jesus' way of nonviolence.

Sunday, Sept. 15: Lochgilphead

This morning, I attended Mass at the beautiful Jesuit church then took another walk through Glasgow before meeting Dermot at 1 p.m. for the long drive through the glorious mountains and lakes of western Scotland.

Paradise! We drove north along Loch Lomond and made our way to Inveraray, one of my favorite places on the planet. We walked along the gorgeous blue lake and had coffee and a sandwich in one of the shops. In 1998, I vacationed here with my Irish Jesuit friends Terry and Jim. We had just finished the Spiritual Exercises in Belfast, then spent a week relaxing with a group of Jesuits at the old Jesuit house on the beach in Wales, where Gerard Manley Hopkins used to vacation. Then Terry, Jim and I drove through West Scotland for a week. Driving through the winding roads, along the lochs and firths and mountain roads, we laughed and talked and enjoyed every minute. It was one of the highlights of my sabbatical year.

The lochs, mountains, narrow roads, green fields, periodic rain and blue sky are stunning. We eventually arrived in the lake village of Lochgilphead, where we found the little parish and the new pastor, Fr. David Connolly, waiting for us. He welcomed us, then took us to dinner at the Stag hotel in the center of town. By 7 p.m., some 40 locals had gathered in an upper room for my talk. Afterward, we enjoyed tea and biscuits and engaged in friendly conversation. Once again, I urged them to do what they could to close Faslane.

Afterward, David took me to the local pub, then we stayed up talking until 2 a.m. Fr. David is about 44 and was ordained only 2 years ago. For 20 years, he was the postmaster in the next village. He's full of life, great with people, a local, down to earth, and full of the spirit of God. When his parents died within a short time of one another, he decided to take the leap, enter the seminary, and risk a new life. He's been welcomed with open arms, and I'm confident he'll be a great pastor. Recently, he announced he would attend a protest at Faslane and wanted the parish to join him. So a parish group drove with him to the gates of the Trident sub base. These days, that's no small event, but a real Christ-like step.

Monday, Sept. 16: Perth

This morning, Dermot and I said farewell to Fr. David and drove east back though the mountains and along the magical waters of the various lochs and firths and the lowlands to Perth. We stopped at the Green Welly for coffee and scones and eventually found our way to the retreat center run by the Sacred Heart sisters called Garden Cottage Kilgraston. Sr. Barbara welcomed me and showed us around. The center is located on the grounds of an old Scottish mansion, which the sisters bought in 1930 and turned into a prominent girls' school. The apple orchard became the site of the retreat center. It looks out over gorgeous green hills in the distance and is surrounded by a beautiful old brick wall. In one corner, a small two-story apartment has been built for guests of the sisters. It's my home for the next day.

At 1 p.m., my friend Jesuit Fr. Chris Boles arrived and drove me toward Perth for a long lunch and walk through the countryside. Chris is like my Scottish twin. For years, he led the Lauriston Street community in public

works for justice and peace. Now he serves as the assistant to the Jesuit provincial in London, and he misses his Scottish homeland. He brought me to speak in Scotland years ago, and I've been visiting ever since. Recently, his beloved father died, a devout man who gave his life to Chris and his siblings. We had often planned to visit Mr. Boles in the country, and that was one of my hopes for this trip, but he died just before I arrived.

Tonight, I spoke to some 40 people at the retreat center. It was very moving, perhaps because we were in such a prayerful space and welcomed so warmly by the wonderful Sacred Heart sisters. We quickly took a spiritual perspective on the world of war and the task at hand. The point, we agreed, was to live out, even in this world of war, the contemplative encounter we have experienced with the God of peace. That's what is asked of us.

Tuesday, Sept. 17: Brechin

At 9 a.m., I spoke to 350 high school girls next door at Kilgraston School, founded by the Sacred Heart sisters. Afterward, I spoke to several large classes of the senior girls and faced their serious but exciting questions about the world and faith.

But I was most touched by a tall senior girl who waited to speak to me after everyone left the auditorium.

"Why bother?" she asked with deadly seriousness. "You know there's no hope."

I looked her in the eye and saw there an alive young woman whose hope for a happy future was being dashed by the world of greed and war. I did my best to encourage her to trust in God, do what she could, and not give in to the luxury of despair. I hope and pray for her, and all the girls, that they might choose hope and do what they can to wake up and serve suffering humanity.

After lunch at the school, Fr. David Mumford drove me east across Scotland to his home in the ancient village of Brechin, just south of Aberdeen. David is an Episcopal priest and the former director of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation. We have much in common and much to discuss, given our shared experience with FOR. While he went off to visit the sick, I rested then took a walk through town. Tonight, David hosted a session for parishioners right in the rectory living room, a conversation on peace and nonviolence. Another full day!

Wednesday, Sept. 18: Dundee

A free morning after my first good night's sleep. I walked again through Brechin and spent nearly two hours in quiet meditation in David's backyard garden. After lunch together, we set off for Dundee to the home of Tim Duffy, across the water in nearby Cupar. Tim serves as the head of Justice and Peace Scotland, one of my primary sponsors. Tim and his wife, Margaret, took me to the countryside to walk the grounds of an ancient Scottish mansion with magnificent green rolling hills in every direction.

After Tim's delicious curry dinner, we went to the university in Dundee, where I spoke to some 50 people. Later, Tim and I sat up till midnight, talking and watching a BBC special on the life of Irish poet Seamus Heaney, who died recently. I enjoy his poems and was moved by his love of language and meaning. Most of all, I enjoyed Tim and Margaret and their wit and wisdom.

Thursday, Sept. 19: Glasgow

This morning, Dermot drove Tim and me west toward Glasgow. Tim and I cracked jokes and told funny stories about the church and the peace movement the whole way, but when we arrived in Glasgow, I found a room of SCIAF staff workers waiting for me. I did not know I still had one last talk to give but jumped in and did my best. Of course, I remain grateful to SCIAF and J & P Scotland for organizing my speaking tour and making me

feel so welcome. I kept telling them they had more power than they realized, that they lived in a very important place in the Western world, that a movement here would have major ramifications for England and America, and not to lose heart but to keep organizing and building the movement for justice and peace.

This afternoon, I said my goodbyes and caught the fast train back to Edinburgh. After a rest, I walked through Edinburgh and enjoyed dinner on the Grassmarket plaza near the Jesuit house.

Friday, Sept. 20: Edinburgh

My last day in Scotland. A day of rest. I slept in, lingered over breakfast with the Jesuits, sat in a coffee shop and wrote postcards to friends, and later walked along Princes Street and the Royal Mile. Then I took in a movie and had dinner on the cobblestoned plaza at the Grassmarket.

The Jesuits are excited by the interview with Pope Francis published yesterday in Jesuit periodicals around the world. Francis spoke of his openness to the future, his hopes for the church, his commitment to the poor, and his determination not to repeat past mistakes, especially his authoritarian tendencies.

I'm glad for this wide-ranging interview and the new human spirit coming from Rome, but I dare not get my hopes up. My expectations for the church have always been too high, and I've learned to keep them low. So I keep plugging along, doing what I can to build up the grass-roots movement of justice, peace and nonviolence and try to remain hopeful but realistic.

Saturday, Sept. 21: London

Alas, my time in bonnie Scotland has come to an end. I've made new friends, seen the glorious countryside and tried my best to inspire people to do their "wee bit" for justice and peace. At 4 a.m., I caught a cab to the airport, then an early flight to London.

But at Heathrow, the exhaustion of the last 10 days hit me. I waited for three hours for my flight only to have to make a mad dash to catch it in time. So there I was, walking fast through thousands of other travelers toward the train to my terminal and gate, when I noticed the woman walking right next to me, shoulder to shoulder. It was none other than Joan Baez!

"Joan?" I said. "It's me, John!"

"Oh my God," she screamed, and kissed and hugged me. She was on her way home after joining the Dalai Lama and Aung San Suu Kyi at a peace conference in Prague. We had a happy reunion right there in crowded Heathrow and agreed to meet soon in New York. And so, I left Scotland rejoicing, giving thanks, and filled with hope.

The road to peace, I keep discovering, is filled with blessings.

[John Dear's new book, *The Nonviolent Life*, is now available at paceebene.org [1]. Next year, John will undertake a national book tour. To see John's speaking schedule or to invite him to speak in your church or peace group, go to his website [2] or contact the Franciscan-based peace group Pace e Bene [3]. John's book *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [4] and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* [5], *Put Down Your Sword* [6] and *A Persistent Peace* [7], are available from Amazon.com.]

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