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Leaving the Jesuits after 32 years

John Dear | Jan. 7, 2014 On the Road to Peace

This week, with a heavy heart, I am officially leaving the Jesuits after 32 years. After three years of discernment, I'm leaving because the Society of Jesus in the U.S. has changed so much since I entered in 1982 and because my Jesuit superiors have tried so hard over the decades to stop my work for peace -- most recently, when my provincial ordered me to Baltimore but gave me no assignment and, I felt, encouraged me to leave, as many other superiors have done in the past.

According to my provincial, the Society of Jesus in the U.S. has renounced its commitment to "the faith that does justice." It has also deepened its financial involvement with the culture of war and decreased its work with the poor in favor of serving through its universities and high schools. Given this change and the lack of support (and, at times, censure) I have endured over the years and its debilitating effect on my health, I realized I could no longer stay.

This decision was sparked three years ago, when Archbishop Michael Sheehan of Santa Fe, N.M., removed my priestly faculties because he objected to the prayer vigils for peace and against nuclear weapons development I was leading at the Los Alamos National Laboratory, the birthplace of nuclear weapons. He had received many complaints regarding my peace efforts over the years from the local pastor in Los Alamos and other Catholics who work in Los Alamos, building nuclear weapons.

After this, Fr. James Shea, my Jesuit provincial, the head of the Maryland Province, ordered me to leave New Mexico and return to Baltimore, to be near province headquarters. Instead of supporting my work for peace, he was embarrassed by it. I moved to Baltimore, where the archbishop there gave me full priestly faculties as a priest in good standing, though I was not given an assignment by my provincial. Over the course of several meetings, I felt Fr. Shea was urging me to stop my work for justice and peace and leave the society. He said, for example, that nothing I have done over the last 10 years has had anything to do with the Society of Jesus.

He explained to me that the Society of Jesus has renounced Fr. Pedro Arrupe's groundbreaking vision of justice and the documents of the 31st and 32nd General Congregations, which call for a radical commitment to justice. It no longer advocates for justice or works for justice, he told me. The Maryland Province has closed all its projects that serve the poor. From now on, he said, because the number of Jesuits is in sharp decline, U.S. Jesuits will only serve in our 25 universities and 25 high schools. This direction, it seems to me, differs vastly from the order I entered in 1982, with its visionary call to "accompany Jesus as he carries the cross in the struggle for justice." If I stayed, he said, I would have to work in one of the Jesuit high schools.

In recent years, I've been saddened to see many Jesuits involved in the U.S. military, our schools deepen their involvement in the U.S. military, and Jesuits permitted to work even in places such as the Los Alamos Labs, West Point, and Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. As far as I can tell, Jesuits who work for the military can continue their work. I've been especially saddened that the Jesuits at Loyola University in Baltimore have been allowed to hold an annual Mass where [1] after Communion, they bring their nearly 100 ROTC cadets into the sanctuary to profess an oath to "defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic." I told my provincial that I consider this blasphemy, a mockery of Jesus and the Eucharist, but he said he had no

problem with it.

So after five months in Baltimore as a priest in good standing, I moved back to New Mexico, went on a leave of absence from the Jesuits, continued my discernment, asked to leave and this week, left the society. I'm still a Catholic priest but have no priestly faculties. I doubt any U.S. bishop will give me faculties because most also object to my work against war and injustice, so I'm not sure if I will remain a priest.

In his recent *America* interview [2], Pope Francis spoke of the great harm he did when he was a Jesuit provincial through what he called his "authoritarianism." For decades, my friends and I have suffered under similar authoritarianism. We believe many U.S. provincials and superiors abuse the vow of obedience to suppress public, political work for justice and peace, which we regard as central to discipleship to Jesus and at the heart of the Jesuit mission.

I've long believed that Jesus was nonviolent and that he commands us to put down the sword, love our enemies, and become peacemakers and justice-seekers. I think that means every Christian has to become nonviolent and reject war and violence, and that the church, locally and globally, has to reject war and violence and espouse and practice nonviolence. Also, that every religious order has to reject war and violence and espouse and practice nonviolence. If Jesus really is the divine embodiment of peace and nonviolence, then everything has to change to fit within his vision and methodology of nonviolence.

My vocation is to follow the nonviolent Jesus by teaching and practicing the Sermon on the Mount, resisting the culture of war and injustice, and proclaiming and welcoming God's reign of peace and nonviolence. I've been told in very clear terms by many Jesuit leaders that U.S. Jesuits do not do this. I'm very sad about this and am moving on to try to remain faithful to my calling. I'm grateful for all the wonderful experiences I've had as a Jesuit -- the studies, retreats, prayers, travels, good works and, most of all, friendships.

I think the nonviolent Jesus wants us -- all of us -- to work as best we can in these critical times for the abolition of war, poverty, nuclear weapons and catastrophic climate change so God's reign of peace will spread. So I have joined the staff of Pace e Bene [3], a small group that works to promote Gospel nonviolence. I'm also helping to organize Campaign Nonviolence [4], which calls for demonstrations across the country in every congressional district before the elections this fall to protest war, poverty and environmental destruction, beginning with a national gathering Sept. 21 in Washington, D.C. I hope everyone will join this exciting movement. We need everyone's help.

I thank all those who have supported me and my work over the years and ask for your prayers in this time of transition, that I might continue to do my part to promote God's reign of peace and justice for many years to come. Let's also pray that the Society of Jesus and the church might uphold the nonviolence of Jesus more and more. May the God of peace bless us all!

[John Dear's new book, *The Nonviolent Life*, is available at paceebene.org [5] and Amazon.com [6]. John will be in South Africa for the rest of the month and will speak in California in February. He will lead a weekend retreat, "Lotus in a Sea of Fire [7]," with Roshi Joan Halifax Feb. 28-March 2 at the Upaya Zen Center in Santa Fe, N.M. For more information, go to John's website [8].]

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