

[Opinion](#)



Photos, clockwise from top center: Martin Sheen (CNS/Bob Roller); Bernard Lafayette (Wikimedia Commons); John Dear (Courtesy of John Dear); St. Joseph Sr. Helen Prejean (CNS/Paul Haring); Franciscan Fr. Richard Rohr (CNS/Courtesy of Franciscan Media)



by John Dear

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"If we don't take the Gospel personally," Martin Sheen said, "then it's impersonal. And if it's impersonal, then so what?"

That's what the award-winning actor Sheen said to me the other day when we recorded [the latest episode of "The Nonviolent Jesus Podcast."](#)

Sheen is one of our most celebrated actors, known for movies such as "Apocalypse Now," "Gandhi," "[Selma](#)," "The American President," "Gettysburg," "[The Way](#)," "Badlands" and many more. He was the star of the popular TV series "[The West Wing](#)," where he played President Josiah Bartlet.

Martin is also perhaps our most committed activist celebrity, speaking out against war, injustice, homelessness and nuclear weapons. He has been a passionate advocate for justice, disarmament and peace for over four decades.

He's also been my close friend for 40 years. I asked him about taking the Gospel personally because I heard him say that about 25 years ago, and I had never heard anyone say that before.

I began our conversation by asking him about the phrase, "the nonviolent Jesus," that I named the podcast, because he helped me to realize how important that phrase is, given our world of violence, injustice and permanent warfare. He attended my first Mass in 1993 at an inner-city parish in Washington, D.C., where I referred to the nonviolent Jesus, and he's been reminding of that over the years. Now I almost always refer to Jesus that way, to help people know that Jesus was completely against violence, and as nonviolent as [Mahatma Gandhi](#), [Martin Luther King Jr.](#) and [Dorothy Day](#).

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"I've come through the church over many decades, and you and Daniel Berrigan and some peace people are the only ones who use that phrase, who address our brother Jesus as *the nonviolent Jesus*. It makes all the difference in the world," he said.

During our conversation, Martin tells stories about Jesuit Fr. [Daniel Berrigan](#) and [Philip Berrigan](#); his experience of activism and civil disobedience; making "Apocalypse Now" and coming back to the church; and, most of all, going forward in faith, hope and love. His positive spirit in these negative times is contagious.

"We're challenged to find something in our lives worth fighting for," Sheen says, "something deeply personal and uncompromising, something that unites the will of the spirit to the work of the flesh. And when we find that, we have discovered fire for the second time.

"That, to me, is peacemaking. That, to me, is my real Catholic faith. That is where I meet the God of nonviolence. That is where it gets real personal for me, in the effort to unite the will of the spirit to the work of the flesh."

Hope you will be [inspired by his testimony](#) as I was.

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