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## **Faith in Nonviolence**

**By Brendan Smith**

*Journal Staff Writer*

For 20 years, the Rev. John Dear has fought for peace, using nonviolent protests and stints in jail as a personal struggle and testament against war.

"War is terrorism, I think," Dear said. "I believe war never works, and nonviolence is the way we are called to live as human beings."

Dear, a Jesuit priest, moved to Springer in September from New York City to serve nine small Catholic churches in northeastern New Mexico. After the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, Dear counseled grieving relatives and rescue workers at ground zero.

He also once spent eight months in a North Carolina jail cell — with the late ex-priest and Vietnam-era activist Philip Berrigan — for banging on a F-15E fighter jet with a hammer.

Now Dear is opposing both President Bush's buildup to war with Iraq and the nuclear weapons work of Los Alamos and Sandia national laboratories.

New Mexico has "the best and the worst of everything," Dear said.

"It has this wonderful spirituality between the Native American community and the innate Catholic spirituality," he said.

"Los Alamos is just not only immoral, I think what we're doing there is demonic," Dear said. "If we tell Iraq they aren't allowed to have one nuclear weapon, why do we have thousands of them in New Mexico? This is terrorism as well, and it's got to stop."

Dear, a 43-year-old North Carolina native, has written or edited 20 books on peace and justice. He said he has been arrested more than 75 times for civil disobedience and nonviolent peace protests across the country.

"I think to be a Christian, you cannot support war. You cannot support the bombing of Iraq," he said. "You have to try loving the people of all the world, and that includes the people of Iraq."

### **Paying the price**

Dear was usually booked and released for his protests, but he spent eight months in a tiny jail cell in 1993-94 with Berrigan, which led Dear to write a book called "Peace Behind Bars: A Peacemaking Priest's Journal from Jail."

Berrigan and Dear prayed before walking onto Seymour Johnson Air Force Base in Goldsboro, N.C., in 1993.

"We literally walked onto the military base and walked through thousands of soldiers playing war games," Dear said. "I took out a little tiny hammer and hammered on (a F-15E fighter jet), and for that I faced up to 20 years in prison."

"I didn't even put a dent in it," he said.

Dear said he was convicted of two felonies, destruction of government property and conspiracy. He had been inspired by Berrigan, who led many of the most dramatic peace protests and used homemade napalm for draft-card burnings to oppose the Vietnam War.

Berrigan also started the Plowshares for Peace group, which encouraged activists to

beat on weapons of war in a symbolic gesture to hammer them into plowshares.

Dear presided at Berrigan's funeral this month in Baltimore, which was attended by about 600 people at an inner-city church.

With friends living in northern New Mexico, Dear decided to move to Springer from New York City, where he was director of the nonprofit Fellowship of Reconciliation. He also coordinated hundreds of chaplains of different faiths who counseled friends and family members who lost loved ones in the World Trade Center attack.

About 1,500 grieving relatives received counseling from Dear, who called his job "compassionate listening."

"Usually, people just wanted to have some type of chaplain they could share their pain with," he said. "It was all a very powerful and overwhelming experience."

Dear was ready for change and thought the wide-open skies and rugged mountains of northern New Mexico would be an antidote for the crowds and skyscrapers of Manhattan.

"I volunteered to come here. The archbishop was delighted," Dear said. "By and large, I have the full support of the Jesuits and the (Catholic) church, and I would dare say the pope, who is very much against war, and the threatened war with Iraq."

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a statement last month calling on President Bush and other world leaders to "find the will and the ways to step back from the brink of war with Iraq and work for a peace that is just and enduring."

While most Catholic bishops voted last year to support the U.S. war in Afghanistan as a "just war," Dear does not believe in Catholic just-war theory or the idea that any war can be just, including World War II and the American Revolution.

However, Dear does not believe in passivity either and supports nonviolent activism such as that practiced by Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi to force change.

"I am trying to teach and practice the message of Jesus," he said. "Violence in response to violence only leads to more violence."

### **Welcomed to N.M.**

Archbishop Michael J. Sheehan of the Archdiocese of Santa Fe, when asked about Dear on Friday, said "the people of Springer and Cimarron are delighted to have a priest to serve them."

Sheehan said Dear "was looking for a quieter and more pastoral opportunity to serve the church, and I look forward to working with him in the days and years to come ... He's happy to be here and to be of service to parishioners of the rural communities of northern New Mexico."

"His activism in the peace movement goes back for many years," the archbishop noted.

Sheehan said there have always been pacifists within the church and Christianity and that on such issues "there are a wide range of acceptable positions" within the church.

Dear now serves churches or missions in Cimarron, Springer, Eagle Nest, Angel Fire, Black Lake, Maxwell, Paolo Blanco, Tinaja and Rayado.

"I have a truck, and I drive all over the place," he said. "It is a big switch for me."

Dear said he supports Catholic doctrine prohibiting birth control and abortion, even though many argue that doctrine contributes to overpopulation and starvation in the Third World.

Contrary to Catholic doctrine, Dear believes that women should be ordained and that priests should be allowed to marry.

Dear even has his own Web site at [www.fatherjohndear.org](http://www.fatherjohndear.org) featuring his sermons, articles and books. In one article, he calls the Catholic Church's scandal over pedophile priests unconscionable and the cover-up of those abuses "a grave injustice."

Dear wrote that he hopes the Catholic Church "finally learns to reject its love of power, domination, secrecy and sexism to become the community of peace and nonviolence that Jesus calls us to be."

Although he is somewhat isolated in northeastern New Mexico, Dear still attends protests, including one against war with Iraq outside Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's home in Taos in October.

On Jan. 18, Dear will be a featured speaker at the National March Against the War in Washington, D.C. For more information on the rally, go to [www.unitedforpeace.org](http://www.unitedforpeace.org).

"It's a way of life," he said. "It's what every Christian is supposed to do, to do what one can to make peace."