

The following is the text of a talk by John Dear to one thousand people at the Call to Action national conference in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on Saturday, September 15, 2001, on the theme of peacemaking and nonviolence. It was transcribed and published in the Call to Action newsletter. For further information, check out, www.cta-usa.org

"At the CTA conference in L.A. on August 4th, I was saying: things are going to get worse. We've seen it this week. Like all of you, I am in shock and grief.

The country is rattling on for war. We're going to annihilate Afghanistan, and Iraq if possible, or Pakistan, or Libya or everybody, "ending states" that harbor terrorists. I just spent the whole year working on a book on Gandhi. When the bomb went off in Hiroshima, he said, "Unless the world adopts nonviolence now, we are doomed." And he said that right up to the hour he was killed.

Like all of you, I don't know what to say. But I've been thinking of Jesus weeping over Jerusalem. His whole life was set on making the journey to Jerusalem, yet he gets there and breaks down and cries and says: "If only you had understood the ways of peace. " And in Luke 13, Jesus says: "Remember the 18 people who were killed when the tower fell down at Siloam? Do you think they were more guilty than the people of Jerusalem? Not at all. But unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." What a thing to say after a disaster! Since Tuesday, all of us are repenting, repenting of the culture of violence. And learning to enter into the gospel of nonviolence.

We are all grieving. That is the first part of our ministry of peace. It is a time of prayer, of deepening our nonviolence, of interfaith work more than ever, of building communities of peace. With this conference we are becoming a church of peace that teaches the message of Jesus that we are not a people who kill or retaliate.

Our message is: violence doesn't solve anything, violence only leads to the never-ending spiral of violence. Killing people who kill people is not the way to teach people that killing is wrong. Bombing those who bomb doesn't stop the bombing. State-sanctioned terrorism does not stop terrorism. Violence in response to violence only leads to further violence. Our message is that there is no just war, no justified violence, no justified bombings. We don't retaliate. We are not allowed to kill. God does not bless war or bombings or killings. Period.

Maybe one or two brief stories from my own life will help. In 1985 a group of us young Jesuits went to live and work in El Salvador. The first day we had a meeting with the famous Jesuit president of the university, Ignacio Ellacuria. His first words to us were: "The purpose of our work here in El Salvador is to promote the reign of God. However, you can no longer be for the reign of God unless you stand up, publicly and actively, against the anti-reign. You can no longer say you are for peace unless you are publicly, actively against war."

That's what Gandhi said: "Non-cooperation with evil is as much a duty as cooperation with good." Ellacuria said, "So here in El Salvador, we are against not only the rebels, the starvation and the injustice; we are against U.S. military aid and the bombings and all the guns. And they are going to kill us. But we are proclaiming the reign of God." That night we had dinner at the house of the Jesuits. The room was covered with bullet holes. They had been strafed a dozen times. They were bombed 21 times between 1979 and 1985. They were averaging 10-15 death

threats a week for the previous seven years.

They sent us out to work in refugee camps for three months. We saw the daily bombs. Then as you know, on Nov. 16, 1989, they were awakened at 1 AM, dragged out, forced to lie down on the lawn, and shot in the head. And their brains were removed and put next to them. As Jon Sobrino says, this was a message sent to all of Latin America: This is what you get if you think about reality. Sobrino would say we have to think about what is happening in the world and speak about it. We have to be people who proclaim the reign of God, the reign of peace and nonviolence and justice. And we have to stand up publicly against the anti-reign of war, injustice and death.

How do I practice the gospel as they did, to the point of risking one's life? Can it be done in this country?

On Dec. 7, 1993, with Philip Berrigan and two others, after 10 years of preparation, I walked at 4 AM into the Seymour Johnson Air Force Base in North Carolina, the cutting edge of the U.S. war machine, where the F15s and F16s are, the same planes that are now flying over Manhattan and flying over D.C. breaking the sound barrier all week. Those planes were used during the Gulf War. They can carry nuclear weapons. We walked past the "Trespassers will be shot on sight" sign, and there before us lay three giant airports with 75 huge planes, and thousands of soldiers milling about. While the rest of us sleep, the war machine barrels on full steam. We didn't know it, but they were in the midst of full scale war games to bomb Bosnia. What does one do? We came up to one plane and hit it with small hammers, invoking Isaiah who said someday, people will beat their swords into plowshares. Immediately there were 10 soldiers with machine guns aimed at us, and then 20. They threw us on the ground. Then there were 100 soldiers, then 500. We had three machine guns at each one of our heads and our faces were in the ground and they were kicking us and I was thinking of Ignacio Ellacuria and the Jesuit martyrs, face down on the ground in El Salvador.

So you can practice the gospel here in the U.S. and risk your life, if you dare. It means walking with our fears into these places of death, and saying, "No more. Not in my name. We are going to stand up and resist the anti-reign of death. And practice Jesus' gospel nonviolence."

They put us in jail and I faced 20 years in prison on two felony counts of destruction of government property and conspiracy to commit a felony crime. We were in county jails throughout North Carolina. It was horrible. We went on trial, disrupted the trial, and we got more time for contempt. But it also was a great blessing, because we felt that the God of peace was there with us, waiting for us in jail.

I've had hundreds of experiences like that. And what I am learning is the ancient lesson of the abolitionists, and the suffragettes, and the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement: positive nonviolent social change only happens when good people break bad laws and accept the consequences. It's going to mean sacrifice. But as Gandhi proved in South Africa and in India, we can't lose, if we keep going forward and giving our lives to these causes, the truth of justice and peace will win all of us over.

I think the world is addicted to violence and death as a normal legal way of proceeding. There are 35 wars happening right now, and the U. N. says that every

day 60,000 people, mostly women and children, die from starvation. We have a litany of violence - death penalty, torture, and imprisonment. Corporate, multinational greed is oppressing the poor, leaving two billion people in total misery - like the World Trade towers landed on them long ago. We are destroying the planet, from the ozone to the oceans, in a whole culture of violence. And on August 6, 1945, as a people addicted to war, yes, we retaliated - by dropping the bomb on Hiroshima and vaporizing 140,000 people. Today we have 30,000 nuclear weapons. We are dismantling all the peace treaties, including the ABM in a few months. We are going to put nuclear weapons all around the planet. If we use Ellacuria as a model in thinking about reality, the World Trade Center bombing is inevitable, if you understand that you reap what you sow, and it is going to continue to be horrific.

We are addicted to violence, and the only way out is through the sobriety of nonviolence. Martin Luther King said it the night before he was killed: "The choice is no longer violence or nonviolence. It is nonviolence or non-existence."

For me, nonviolence comes from the heart, and leads to the vision of the beloved community of humanity and that truth that all life is sacred. Every human being on earth is equal, a child of the God of peace. Once you accept that, you can never hurt another human being, much less kill somebody, or allow war, mass murder, nuclear weapons and starvation and racism and sexism and torture to continue in your name. Nonviolence is not passivity. It is action: creative, public, resisting action that seeks justice and peace for the whole human race, but with one condition: there is no cause for which we will hurt or kill another human being. Rather, we are willing to suffer in the struggle, without even the desire to seek revenge or retaliation.

For me the only way out is to keep looking at Jesus. Everything he did was about nonviolence. Gandhi said, "Jesus was the most active practitioner of nonviolence in the history of the world, and the only people who don't know it are Christians." Jesus is saying, not only love God and one another, but Love your enemies. Then (in the only place where I think he really describes God) "you will be like God who makes the sun shine on the good and the bad, and the rain fall on the just and the unjust." Forgive everyone. His last words, as he is being dragged away, are "Put down that sword."

We still haven't heard that message of Jesus. He is organizing the poor in Galilee, healing, forgiving, loving, encouraging, until he says, "We're going to Jerusalem." Everything he does, I think, is illegal. And civilly disobedient. He breaks every law imaginable trying to get us to be human. He is on this campaign of nonviolence - like Gandhi's salt march. He goes into Jerusalem, he turns over the tables of the moneychangers in the Temple, the center of systemic injustice, and says, "No more, this is a house of God." And they arrest him and torture him and execute him, a victim of the death penalty. As he dies on the Cross, he says, "The violence stops here, in my body." And God raises him from the dead, and he comes back and says to the community, "Now you go back there and start the same journey to your own Jerusalem." That is where we are today.

What to do, now and in the days ahead? A few suggestions:

* Take action. (We are here at the Call To Action.) Organize and stand up publicly as the war continues. Like Sr. Dorothy Hennessey, 88 years old and serving a six month term right now for protesting the School of the Americas. At some point, she stopped going to conferences, and said: I'm going to cross the line. I too will pay the

price and put nonviolence into practice.

* Pray. Meditate an hour a day, and allow the God of peace to disarm our hearts which are filled with violence. Every one of us could push a button, could kill someone, could fly that plane. This is what Thich Nhat Hanh has been trying to teach. We are all violent people, we are the victims as well as the terrorists, and we all have to be disarmed. And we can only be disarmed by God. And that happens through prayer and fasting. We are addicted, and so we have to turn to a Higher Power.

* Form communities of peacemaking and resistance in our parishes. If you sit home and watch TV, it numbs you, fills you with despair. Meet together and say, "What are we going to do?" Vigil, or organize, or send contributions, or do civil disobedience, but get together with friends and do one or two things for peace and justice.

* Reform the Church nonviolently. Change will only come about through nonviolence and Gandhi's satyagraha - being purged of the violence of our resentment and hatred for church officials. Otherwise, maybe we don't deserve a new church. So as we speak out for change and model the change we seek, do it with a heart of pure love and peace for everyone, even our church leaders.

* Ask yourself: what is your image of God? It may be THE question of the times. Yesterday, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the President and the warriors were in the National Cathedral, worshiping god with a small 'g,' calling down blessings for preparation for war. Our God is not a god of war, but the God of peace. Not a god of vengeance or retaliation, but the God of unconditional love for every human being. Do you believe that God is nonviolent? Don't answer right now. Sit with that question in the months ahead and share it with your communities. I don't think we believe God is nonviolent. But that is the image of Isaiah: you climb the mountain, you meet God, you get disarmed, and you start disarming. That image sums up the spiritual life.

* Finally, keep your eyes on Jesus. Take up the cross of nonviolence and enter through our own lives into the Paschal Mystery. In the process we will find hope. The best way I have found to be hopeful is to do hopeful things. You don't have to do everything, but one or two hopeful things, and not place our hope, as Thomas Merton said, in trying to end it all tomorrow, to be effective or straighten everything out. That's the way the Pentagon thinks. We will receive the gift of peace from the God of peace. We will receive it as a gift, and we will become signs of living peace in this time of war.