

Close the School of the Americas:

Sermon at the Ignatian Teach-in Mass, Columbus, Georgia

November 17, 2001.

"When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for such things must happen first, but it will not immediately be the end. Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom. There will be powerful earthquakes, famines and plagues from place to place; and awesome sights and mighty signs will come from the sky. Before all this happens, however, they will seize and persecute you, they will hand you over to the synagogues and to prisons, and they will have you led before kings and governors because of my name. It will lead to your giving testimony. Remember you are not to prepare your defense beforehand, for I myself will give you a wisdom in speaking that all your adversaries will be powerless to resist or refute. You will even be handed over by parents, brothers, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name, but not a hair on your head will be destroyed. By your perseverance you will secure your lives." -- Luke 21: 9-19

After meeting Ignacio Ellacuria and the Jesuits of El Salvador in 1985, I wondered for a long time how can I live the Gospel of Jesus here in the empire, in this culture of death? Is it possible to take another step into the Gospel, to risk one's life, to give one's life to suffering humanity like the Jesuit martyrs and the saints of Central America? Is it possible, in this culture of war and violence to love our enemies?

On December 7, 1993, with Philip Berrigan, Bruce Friedrich and Lynn Fredriksson, I crossed the line onto the Seymour Johnson Air Force Base, in Goldsboro, North Carolina, at 4 a.m. right passed the sign which says "Trespassers will be shot on sight," up a bluff where we saw the whole air base before us, like 3 huge airports, with thousands of soldiers and police officers milling around 75 huge F15 fighter bombers, the cutting edge of the U.S. killing machine. These bombers can carry nuclear weapons, were used to kill 75,000 Iraqi soldiers at the end of the Gulf war, were on alert that night to bomb Bosnia and are being used in the war right now. We were shocked because we suddenly realized that while we sleep tight, the war machine barrels on full steam ahead.

We had spent months and years pondering the prophet Isaiah who said, "Someday people are going to come along and beat their swords into plowshares," and Jesus who gave us that famous commandment "Love your enemies, don't nuke 'em." So, we went up to one of the F15s and I took out a hammer and hammered on it, and I felt like a cartoon character, shaking backwards from the plane, not putting a dent in it. We were surrounded by five soldiers with machine guns aimed at us, and as the spokesperson for the group, I took a deep breath and said, "We are unarmed, peaceful people; we mean you no harm; we are just here to dismantle this weapon of death." I was hoping they were going to say: "Thank God you're here. Of course, come right ahead, why didn't we think of it!" But they pushed us on the ground and as I lay there with machine guns touching my head, I thought of Ellacuria and the Jesuit martyrs and realized, "Wow, you can live the Gospel of Jesus in this empire."

For that action, my friends and I faced 20 years in prison and we found guilty of two felony counts--destruction of government property and conspiracy to commit a

felony, and I spent 8 months in jail, 9 months under house arrest in the Jesuit community, and 3 years on parole.

Jail was difficult. Phil and I were in a tiny cell, and we never left it except for a few days to go to court. But, everyday we studied the scriptures, took wonder bread, passed the grape juice, celebrated Eucharist, and felt the presence of the God of peace, as if Jesus had been in the cell waiting for us, and we felt deeply blessed.

Before the action, I had gone to my Jesuit provincial, Fr. Ed Glynn, and gotten permission to participate in the action. Then one day, after six months, he came to visit me in jail. We were only allowed a ten minute visit, and I was brought out by the guards, in my orange jump suit, and there was a glass partition and a microphone between us, and we were making small talk, and I was very nervous, and finally, I leaned forward and said, "Ed, I really need to know, do you still support me?" He sat back, put his hands up as if to frame me in a picture and said, "John, you're right where we want ya."

Everything Jesus says in our Gospel tonight is true. Jesus says violence begets violence, that a culture of violence is doomed to suffer the fruits of violence, that war is not justified or blessed by God, and that the days are coming to Jerusalem when not a stone will be left upon another stone, which is exactly what happened in the year 70 A.D. when Jerusalem was completely destroyed by the Roman soldiers. Likewise Jesus says to us, "Unless you repent of the culture of violence and adopt the way of nonviolence, your violence, wars, nuclear weapons, sanctions, terrorist schools and bombings will enrage the world and lead others to destroy you. What goes around comes around. You reap what you sow. The means are the ends. So stop your wars and your violence and start sowing seeds of nonviolence. Follow me and get with the program."

"They will seize you and persecute you, and hand you over to the religious authorities and to prisons, and you will be led before the rulers, but this will be the time for you to give your testimony. Do not be afraid. Do not prepare your defense," he says, "for I will give you a wisdom in speaking. You will be hated, but not a hair on your head will be destroyed and your perseverance, your faithfulness to the life of nonviolence, to the faith that does justice, to the God of peace, will secure your lives."

So, when our trial came up in North Carolina, we decided to take Jesus' advice, and we walked into court by ourselves without any lawyers to give testimony to Jesus and the Gospel of nonviolence. And we found on the desk an in limine motion, signed by the Judge and the Prosecutor, which said, "In order to have a fair trial, you cannot mention any of the following items--the US military; international law; the Nuremberg principles; the necessity defense, the US government; the crimes committed by the Seymour Johnson Air Force base; U.S. foreign or domestic policies; the bible, theology, philosophy, divine law, or God. Other than that you can say whatever you want; it's a free country." We realized then how the courts are the flipside of our wars and nuclear arsenal; they legalize our violence. We stood up and said, "We're here to speak out against U.S. nuclear weapons and war making, on behalf of God and God's law of nonviolence," and the judge yelled at us, declared a mistrial, and gave us several more months in contempt of court.

Months went by and we had four separate trials and I was called as a witness during Phil Berrigan's trial, and I was on the witness stand, with the judge on one side and the jury on the other, in a packed courthouse, and I was asked, what did you see on December 7th, and I said, "I saw Philip Berrigan stand up for the human race, and point the way out of our madness by beginning the process of disarmament and helping us to become a people of peace," and the judge started yelling, "You can't say that, strike that from the record."

Then, the prosecutor stood up and shouted, "Who drove the car?" I said we take responsibility for our own actions; but the judge ordered the jury out, and said I had to tell who drove the car that day. He was trying to widen the conspiracy against these Catholic Christians, so under duress I found myself saying, "Ok, I'll tell." And the jury was ordered in, and my friends in the peace movement were sinking in their seats, and the prosecutor demanded, "Who drove the car that morning?" and I said, "Thank you for pushing me to the truth of our action, and the truth is, we were driven to the Seymour Johnson Air Force Base, by the HOLY SPIRIT!"

The room exploded and the judge started screaming, "You can't say that, strike that from the record. Off with his head." That was the end of my day in court.

Jesus is telling us in the Gospel tonight, "Yes, the world is full of wars and atrocities and nuclear weapons and the Pentagon and the School of the Americas, and your job is to speak out against all of this violence, to say, Stop the bombings, stop the wars, dismantle all these weapons of mass destruction, close the School of the Americas, feed the children and the refugees, lift the sanctions on Iraq and the debt, bring justice for the poor of the earth and do all this in the name of the God of peace.

It will be hard. People will get mad at you, hate you, arrest you, jail you, maybe even kill you, like they killed Dr. King and the martyrs of Latin America.

But do not be afraid. Keep walking the road to peace. Keep speaking the words of peace. Keep praying to the God of peace.

Tonight our Gospel asks us: How are you being faithful to the nonviolent Jesus and his commandment to love your enemies? How are you giving testimony to Jesus and his life of nonviolence, justice and compassion toward every human being? How do you plan to persevere in the Gospel journey to nonviolence and the God of peace? How willing are you to do this tomorrow and for the rest of your lives, to accompany Jesus as he carries his cross in the nonviolent struggle for justice?

All of you are doing these great Gospel deeds, so the good news tonight, as we gather at the table and break the bread of hope and drink from the cup of life, we can rejoice and be glad because even if we are hated or persecuted for calling for the closing of the School of the Americas, for an end to the bombings and the wars and nuclear weapons and poverty and injustice, even if we get arrested and jailed and even killed, we know that the reign of God is at hand; that death does not get the last word; that the sun of justice will dawn; that we are headed toward resurrection; that our God is a God of peace and we can be people of peace and nonviolence; that we can and will love our enemies, come what may; that we will follow Jesus on the road of nonviolence; that war will be abolished and our swords will be beaten into plowshares and every tear will be wiped away; that our hearts are burning with

hope; that yes, all will be well, all will be well, that, thanks be to God, we are greatly blessed.