

***The Eucharist and Nonviolence:  
Remembering, Reconciling, and Sending Us Forth to Make Peace  
by John Dear***

Last August 6th, on the feast of the Transfiguration, the fifty-fifth anniversary of the U.S. atomic bombing of Hiroshima, and the tenth anniversary of the U.S. economic sanctions on Iraq, I presided at Eucharist with hundreds of friends and peacemakers at my old parish, St. Aloysius, on North Capitol Street in Washington, D.C.

Our gathering was part celebration, part mourning, part reflection and part preparation for action, and it was filled with hope in the risen Christ and his gift of peace.

“Let there be joy, joy, joy in God’s house,” the Gospel choir sang as we began. Indeed, our basement “lower church,” known for exciting liturgies, sheltering the homeless, feeding the hungry, and hosting all kinds of social justice groups, exploded with the joy of that song.

After hearing the readings, I reflected on the transfiguration of Jesus; God’s commandment that we “listen to him;” the bombing of Hiroshima, which Dorothy Day called “the anti-transfiguration;” and my recent experience in Iraq, where I saw how over one million sisters and brothers, mostly children under age five, have died from the sanctions since 1990.

After prayers, we all gathered around the altar, passed the bread and the cup and went forward filled with the Spirit. That afternoon, thousands of us marched from the Lincoln Memorial to the White House to call for an end to the sanctions on Iraq and the abolition of nuclear weapons. The next day, 104 of us were arrested for taking that message to the sidewalk in front of the White House, where we staged a sit-in. We spent the day in jail, telling stories and sharing our faith.

It was a powerful weekend of Gospel nonviolence, and the Eucharist was the heart of it.

For me, as a Christian, Catholic, and Jesuit priest, the Eucharist is the place where I

remember and meet Jesus, the place of peace and reconciliation, and the place that pushes me back into the world to make peace.

### *A Place to Remember Jesus*

Our culture makes it easy to forget who we are and what life is all about. It has long ago forgotten who Jesus is, what peace is, what justice for the poor means.

But the Gospel explains that on the night he was arrested, Jesus broke bread and passed a cup in that last Passover meal, saying, “Whenever you do this, remember me.”

I find that very helpful. I want very much to remember Jesus, to put him at the center of my life, indeed to experience his presence in the midst of community, and so, with friends, to do the things he did.

Eucharist for me then is the place to gather with other Christians to remember Jesus’ life, nonviolent actions, arrest, execution and resurrection. In the process of remembering him, we literally meet him present in our community, in the Word, in the Bread and the Cup, and in one another.

The Eucharist is so astonishing because it shows the depths of Jesus’ love and the peacemaking gift of himself to humanity. Even as his friends are only hours away from betraying him, denying him and running away from him, he reaches out even closer to them saying, “I not only love you and call you my friends, I want to be your food, your drink, your breath.”

Jesus is constantly reconciling us to God through himself. The Eucharist is the ultimate experience of that process.

But the implications of this experience are revolutionary. If we truly remember the life of Jesus, enter into his presence, and take up where he left off, our lives are turned upside-down. We too will start to live as he did, to reach out and give of ourselves like him, and to offer our

lives for humanity in a spirit of loving nonviolence.

### ***A Place of Reconciliation***

In the process of remembering and meeting Jesus in the Eucharist, I find that the community gathered around the table is disarmed and reconciled. Peace is made through the breaking of the bread and the passing of the cup. This is a great mystery and a great gift.

In the process of hearing the Gospel proclaimed and sharing the body and blood of Jesus, we repent of our violence, turn to one another, and offer each other a gesture of peace. The Eucharist sows the seeds of peace and reconciliation.

I see this happen regularly at my neighborhood church in New York City. Whenever I'm home on a weekend, I try to attend the local Franciscan church in my neighborhood on the Upper West Side. Thousands of people of all races come to Eucharist there each Sunday, representing over fifty nations. Coming in off the anonymous, bitter streets of New York City, we find a quiet place of peace and reconciliation, a home. It is an amazing sight to witness, especially in New York. Suddenly, all these different peoples are united in the story of Jesus, pray the Lord's prayer together, turn and embrace one another, and share in the Eucharist. It is a miracle. Some days, I think these Eucharists are the only thing that keeps Manhattan together.

### ***The Place We Go From***

It is from this place of peace and reconciliation where we remember and meet Jesus, that we go into the world with the good news of peace.

I often think of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s definition of church. During the Selma march, at the height of the civil rights movement, Dr. King told a packed congregation that the church "is the place you go from."

I think we can say the same about the Eucharist. From this encounter with Jesus, this

experience of reconciliation, we go from the Eucharist into the world to make peace, seek justice, love our enemies, and reconcile with one another.

In this experience of Jesus and one another, we are disarmed and sent forth into a world armed to the teeth as instruments of God's disarming love.

### ***The Eucharist and Nonviolence***

In the Eucharist, we worship the God of nonviolence, encounter the nonviolent Jesus, and become people of nonviolence.

I often think how only hours after the Last Supper, Jesus was still telling his friends to be people of peace and nonviolence. Indeed, his last official words to the entire community, as he was being arrested and as they running away from him, were, "Put down your sword."

Jesus' last Passover meal is intimately connected to his first commandment to love one another and to love our enemies, and his last commandment, to put down our swords. Jesus lived, taught and practiced nonviolence, and he wants us to do the same.

The Eucharist is the ultimate expression of nonviolence. Jesus gives us his body and blood, and asks that we give ours in peace to one another as well.

Today, in the Eucharist, we remember Jesus, put down our swords, hear his Word of Gospel nonviolence, share his body and blood, receive his spirit of peace, take up his cross, the way of nonviolence, and go forth like him into our culture of violence, with the good news of peace.

From our life together centered in the Eucharist of Jesus, we speak out against nuclear weapons, war, the death penalty, the sanctions on Iraq, economic injustice, poverty, racism and sexism, and call for a new culture of peace and nonviolence.

If we truly enter into the Spirit of the Eucharist, we are transformed and sent into the

world as apostles and prophets of peace. We begin to embody the Gospel, and even risk persecution and arrest like Jesus as we speak out against systemic injustice and announce the coming of God's reign of nonviolence.

Whenever I celebrate Eucharist in intimate community gatherings, prison cells, refugee camps and homeless shelters, I suddenly remember Jesus all over again. I feel disarmed of my violence, reconciled with those around me, forgiven and able to forgive, and nourished and filled with a new inner peace. Somehow in this intimate meal, I receive the strength to take up the journey of nonviolence again, to go forth into the world and try to put the Gospel into practice.

If we are attentive, the Eucharist can help us become people of nonviolence. It will root out the violence within us, and make us peacemakers like St. Francis and Dorothy Day.

The Eucharist not only makes the life of peace possible, it makes peace within and among us here and now. In a culture that knows so little true peace, that is the greatest gift of all.

How typical of Jesus to leave us such a gift.

\* \* \*