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Remembering Richard McSorley, S.J.

BY JOHN DEAR

One of the great voices for peace, Richard McSorley, died on October 17, 2002, in the intensive care unit at Georgetown University hospital in Washington, D.C. He was 88 years old.

Richard McSorley was a Jesuit priest, theologian, author, activist, teacher and legendary figure in the Catholic peace movement. He had been hospitalized for over a month, after having surgery for aneurysms. His health had failed in recent years and he was ready to go to God. But even in the end, he tried to spend every day working for peace, praying for peace, and teaching the wisdom of peace.

I first met Richard McSorley in 1976 when I was a high school student attending a class at Georgetown University. He was well-known around Washington, D.C. for his passionate stand against war. It was not until the summer of 1982, that I came to know him well.

That July, I showed up at his office in a small white building on the edge of Georgetown University. His door was covered with dozens of anti-war bumper-stickers, and in the center, a provocative poster of Jesus carrying a large cross made of nuclear weapons and bombs. We spent the afternoon discussing nuclear weapons, peacemaking, the Jesuits, Reagan's wars in Central America, and the nonviolence of Jesus. I was 21 years old, about to enter the Jesuits, and in awe of his prophetic stand against war and nuclear weapons.

Richard McSorley was born into a large, devout Catholic family in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on October 2, 1914. Seven of his fourteen brothers and sisters entered religious life. In 1932, young Richard entered the Society of Jesus at Wernersville, Pennsylvania. Seven years later, after finishing a degree in philosophy, he was sent to Manila in the Philippines to teach at a Jesuit high school and seminary.

On December 13, 1941, a few days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, he was captured and imprisoned by the Japanese along with hundreds of other Jesuits and seminarians. He was held for over three years, until February 23, 1945. During that time, he was tortured, nearly starved to death, and under the constant threat of execution. Once, he confided to me quietly that on three occasions he was actually brought before the firing squad. Several people around him were shot. The Japanese soldiers took aim to kill him, but then no bullets were fired, and they all laughed at him. U.S. paratroopers captured the camp, took the Japanese by surprise and killed them all. McSorley and the other prisoners were released.

When he returned to the United States, McSorley continued his theology studies and was ordained a priest at Woodstock College, Maryland in 1946.

In 1948, McSorley became pastor of St. James church in St. Mary's City, Maryland, then part of the segregated South, where his first hand experience of racism and segregation opened his eyes to injustice. He underwent a deep faith conversion to the Gospel message of social justice and equality.

"It really changed my life," he later wrote, "to come right out of theology school where racism was never once mentioned to discover that the church was racist in practice. White people came to communion first. Blacks had to wait outside. Blacks sat on one side; whites on the other. I had never seen anything like that before. I had never heard anything about racism in the seminary or in Catholic schools."

McSorley soon realized that he had to take a stand. He started to preach against racism and called for the desegregation of the Catholic church and the nation. His message was not well received by the white parishioners. One night, he received an anonymous tip that some members of the Klan were organizing to kill him. He left town minutes before the posse arrived. Despite constant pressure from the wealthy, white Catholics of southern Maryland to have him transferred, he stayed put and wouldn't shut up. He denounced racism every single day, and affirmed the dignity and equality of all people.

Eventually, in 1952, McSorley was sent to the University of Scranton in Pennsylvania, where he taught philosophy until 1961. During that time, he completed his studies for a doctorate in philosophy at Ottawa University in Canada.

In 1961, he began teaching theology at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., and remained there until his death. In 1962, he befriended Robert Kennedy's family, and became a tutor for his children. Every day throughout the 1960s, he spent several hours with the Kennedy family, teaching, assisting, and helping out. He also became a friend and confidant of President and Mrs. Kennedy, and counseled the family and offered daily Mass for them after JFK's assassination. Later, he consoled RFK's children after their father's murder too.

But it was Martin Luther King, Jr. who changed his life again. "When Martin Luther King, Jr., came on the national scene," he later wrote, "I saw him as a great Christ figure, so I followed him and marched with him. King explained the meaning of the Gospel to me. He taught us that Jesus was serious about nonviolent love, racial justice and peacemaking, and King showed us how to live the Gospel as well."

During the 1960s, McSorley became active in the civil rights movement and traveled to the South on a dozen occasions to support Dr. King and in his campaigns. He marched in Selma, and on one occasion, knelt next to Dr. King in prayer as several Klan members jeered him and threatened to kill him. Dr. King's personal demeanor and steadfast insistence on nonviolence profoundly impressed McSorley.

In 1965, McSorley followed the example of fellow Jesuit Daniel Berrigan and his brother Philip as they spoke out against the Vietnam War. One of his Georgetown students asked him to organize a public discussion about the war. As McSorley started to publicize the event, he was denounced publicly by other faculty members, Jesuits and students. The controversy stunned and hurt him, but he kept at it. Week after week, he continued to speak out against the war, at Mass, in class, on campus and around the country.

He started teaching a course on Christianity and peace which attracted hundreds of students each semester. He encouraged them to become conscientious objectors and to join the anti-war movement. He also started to make connections between the Vietnam war, the U.S. nuclear arsenal, and U.S. militarism and classism in general. Soon, he embraced the Gospel call of nonviolence completely.

In the late 1960s, he began a weekly vigil on the Georgetown campus against the Vietnam War and ROTC. He made a poster which read, "Should we teach hate and death or love and life?" His question, vigil, and outspoken stand infuriated many Georgetown officials, including most Jesuits, who supported the war.

One year, during the annual Georgetown "War Day" for military recruitment, he helped his students rent a helicopter. They dropped thousands of leaflets urging students not to join ROTC or the military and instead to join the anti-war movement.

Richard McSorley was a lightning rod at Georgetown, and throughout Washington, D.C. He sometimes came across as strident and angry, but that was because he passionately opposed the Vietnam war and the church's support of it. Most church officials and Jesuits were annoyed and embarrassed by his consistent, public insistence that the war end immediately. J. Edgar Hoover, the notorious F.B.I. Director, called him "a disgrace," and asked his agents if there "wasn't anything they had on him."

From those early protests, McSorley deepened his theology of peace and broadened his opposition to every form of violence, every war, and all weapons of mass destruction. He spoke out for peace and nonviolence the rest of his life.

In the 1970s, he helped launch Pax Christi USA, the national Catholic peace movement. He worked actively with the International Peace Bureau in Geneva. He moved off the Georgetown University campus and joined the Community for Creative Nonviolence which served the homeless and protested war. For two years, he shared a room with Mitch Snyder, the nation's leading advocate for the homeless. He also founded the St. Francis Catholic Worker House and the Dorothy Day Catholic Worker House. At Georgetown, he founded the Center for Peace Studies, to help facilitate his classes on peace, coordinate his lectures, and distribute his writings. His books, *Kill? For Peace?* and *Peace Eyes* sold out quickly. His book *New Testament Basis for Peacemaking* remains a classic primer on Christian peacemaking.

In the tradition of Dr. King and Mahatma Gandhi, he periodically crossed the line in acts of nonviolent civil disobedience to protest U.S. war making and nuclear weapons. After one

demonstration during the Vietnam war, he ended up in a jail cell with Dr. Benjamin Spock. During the 1980s, he was arrested at the South African embassy for protesting apartheid; at the Soviet consulate in New York City for protesting the nuclear arms race; and at the U.S. Capitol for protesting U.S. nuclear weapons development.

Over the years, he wrote hundreds of articles about the imperative of peacemaking. Perhaps his most significant contribution was his widely publicized statement, "It's a sin to build a nuclear weapon." Through this article and pamphlet, he encouraged church people across the country to take a new look at the U.S. government's development and maintenance of nuclear weapons. He named this work as the ultimate mortal sin.

"Does God approve of our intent to use nuclear weapons?" he asked. "No I don't believe so. Moreover I do not believe God approves even the possession of nuclear weapons."

"The taproot of violence in our society today," he wrote, "is our intent to use nuclear weapons. Once we have agreed to that, all other evil is minor in comparison. Until we squarely face the questions of our consent to use nuclear weapons, any hope of large scale improvement of public morality is doomed to failure. Even the possession of weapons which cannot be morally used is wrong. They are a threat to peace and might even be the cause of nuclear war. The nuclear weapons of Communists may destroy our bodies, but the intent to use nuclear weapons destroys our souls."

For years, he tried to explain that the just war theory had no basis in the Christian Gospel. Finally, in a moment of bitter disappointment with the North American church, he suggested that we start teaching the "just adultery theory." The commandments "Thou shalt not kill" and "Thou shalt not commit adultery" are connected, he argued. If we are going to exempt people from the prohibition against mass murder, why not exempt people from the prohibition against adultery. He proposed the conditions for justified adultery, including "last resort; good intention; protection of the innocent; and proportionality."

"If a follower of Jesus can intentionally kill another human being because a president says it is okay, then surely he can rape another person," he wrote sarcastically. "Can we serve both God and our government when the government orders us to do what God forbids?" he concluded. Of course not. We are not allowed to rape, commit adultery, kill, or support war. The Gospel summons us to God's own nonviolent love, Richard McSorley taught.

"I see my mission in life, as God has made it known to me, to help make the Catholic church what it should be, a peace church," McSorley once told a student newspaper. "To be a Christians means to have respect for life in all its forms and in today's nuclear age, that means, Christians must become active witnesses for peace and must firmly oppose all forms of war."

Throughout his life, Richard McSorley preached the good news that God is a God of peace and wants us to live in peace and nonviolence with one another. "What God wants is that all of us, all God's children, act like brothers and sisters to each other. The Hebrew scriptures says, 'Thou shalt not kill' and the Christian scriptures say 'Love your enemies.' If we believe that we are children of the same God and we believe that we are brothers and sisters to each other, we should act that way. The question always remains: What does God want us to do? No matter what our faith, God wants us to love one another, to act as though we were brothers and sisters to one another. Building and possessing nuclear weapons and waging war are incompatible with that way of life."

In the Christian tradition of Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton and Martin Luther King, Jr., Richard McSorley was a voice for peace in a war-torn world. He said "No" to violence, war and nuclear weapons and "Yes" to nonviolence, peace and life. Throughout his life, he preached the nonviolence of Jesus, and tried to practice it in his own life. In the process, he discovered Christ's gift of peace in his own life.

During the 1980s, I spent years reading Richard's writings and discussing them with him. Finally, we published an anthology of his essays, *It's a Sin to Build a Nuclear Weapon*. He then began work on a novel, which he called, *The President Turns*. It was the story of a right wing, Republican, war making president who meets secretly with a Jesuit and undergoes a serious conversion to Gospel nonviolence. When he starts to dismantle the U.S. nuclear arsenal, the Pentagon plots his assassination. Richard never found a publisher.

Then, he wrote his autobiography, *My Path to Justice and Peace*. He concluded the story of his life with his visit to El Salvador. I was with him on the trip. I remember sitting under a tree with him one sunny afternoon on the lawn where the six Jesuits were assassinated on November 16, 1989. We prayed together, looked at the roses around the house, and discussed the meaning of their martyrdom and our own vocation to stand for peace. We were deeply moved by their murders and their steadfast resistance to war, and determined to keep speaking out against much

as we could.

Though he was a teacher and peacemaker, he was first and foremost a man of God, a person of prayer, a contemplative.

I remember him calling me one summer day in the early 1990s. He said that he had done everything he could to work for the abolition of ROTC on Catholic campuses, everything except pray for that intention. He had decided that he would pray for the end of ROTC, war and nuclear weapons out loud at every Mass for the rest of his life.

One month later, ROTC was temporarily closed at Georgetown (for lack of funds). He attributed this to his prayer.

As we remember Richard McSorley, at this critical moment when our nation prepares to bomb Iraqi children and continues to maintain a massive nuclear arsenal, we might want to take up Richard's prayer, and ask the God of peace to abolish war, ROTC, nuclear weapons, poverty and every form of violence, once and for all. Surely, he is now petitioning God face to face to grant our prayer.

Thank you, Richard, for your prophetic life.

May we take up where you left off.

May the church become a church of peace.

May we become people of nonviolence.

May war finally be abolished.

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