



Give peace a chance

BY CHRIS McWILLIAMS

Nobody can do everything, but everybody's got to do something.

This is the message of 47-year-old Father John Dear SJ, a Jesuit priest and peace activist of 25 years, who has been arrested 75 times and was facing jail again on his return home to America after a speaking tour of Australia in March.

"My hope and message in coming to Adelaide is to encourage those working for peace and justice to call more and more Catholics to reflect on the non-violence of Jesus and to ponder how they are practising it in their own lives," he told *The Southern Cross*.

"Get involved in the grass roots movements of justice and peace, whether for Aboriginal human rights, global warming, stopping Australia's support of the war in Iraq or the ongoing development of nuclear weapons around the world.

"Jesus wants us to become people of non-violence."

The lives of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King are clearly vital to Fr John's life and work, but the teachings of Jesus hold the key, giving him great strength and courage.

"Catholics can follow the catechism and Canon Law, go to Mass on Sundays and practise the sacraments and that's all very, very good," he says.

"But the point is to follow Jesus. He wants us to do what he says, otherwise he wouldn't have said it. And he says some very serious and clear things.

"Love your enemies. I don't think you can be Catholic or follow Jesus and support war or killing your enemies, which Australia is doing. Australia is involved in killing children in Iraq and killing Christ again.

"Jesus says 'blessed are the peacemakers' and 'put down the sword'. We can be good, patriotic Americans and be excited and proud of George W. Bush and that's fine, but we're not following Jesus. Let's be clear about that."

When he became a Jesuit aged 22, Fr John had no intention of working for peace and justice. But on a pilgrimage to



the Holy Land that same year he saw jets swoop down and bomb innocent civilians.

"It was an incredible experience and I have never recovered," he says. "I made a solemn promise to try and live and teach the Sermon on the Mount for the rest of my life.

"So that led me to organise for love and peace and justice and to walk among the poor and get involved in every cause in the whole world. There's plenty to work on."

Fr John started his life as a peace activist with the Jesuits in the middle of war-torn El Salvador in the 1980s, acting as a human shield when soldiers went on killing sprees in refugee camps.

'I walked up to the military base and actually hammered on a nuclear fighter bomber. We didn't even chip the paint, much less dent the thing, and for that act I faced 20 years in prison.'

"I knew I could get killed but I never thought about stopping. I thought if I was going to be a Jesuit, not have a family and do this, I might as well go the whole route," he says.

"That's my attitude. Life is short. Like Gandhi and King and Christ, I'm willing to be killed."

Later, he returned to America, became more involved in the peace and

justice movements and began organising demonstrations – hundreds of them.

With other Catholics he would go to military bases, or places such as the White House or the Pentagon, kneel down, pray and call for an end to war, nuclear weapons and poverty.

"Of course this doesn't go over very well and you get arrested and thrown in jail for a couple of days. Then we would pray about it and go back and do it again," he says.

"That led me to my most notorious 'crime' when, with three friends, I walked up to the military base and actually hammered on a nuclear fighter bomber. We didn't even chip the paint, much less dent the thing, and for that act I faced 20 years in prison.

"Just as we dismantled gas chambers we need to dismantle nuclear weapons, electric chairs and abortion machines. All of these things should not exist.

"We went into the court and said we were obeying the law of non-violence and love and the law of Jesus which says love your enemies, which means you can't be prepared to nuke 'em.

"This didn't go over very well but you do what you can. I ended up doing about nine months in a tiny cell about the size of a dining table.

"We had no lawyers because Luke says when they haul you before the judges trust the Holy Spirit – we were trying to be simple, even naïve Christians following Jesus."

And Fr John is sure we all have a role to play.

"I'm not saying everyone has to hang on to a nuclear weapon, but everyone has to do something peacefully and non-violently for the coming of the reign of God – a new world without war, poverty and weapons," he said.

"We all have to begin to build a grass roots global non-violent movement for peace and justice – that's the future of the world. I think this is the most important work that anyone can be involved in.

"Jesus teaches us how to live, how to love, how to pray, how to be a community, how not to be afraid, how to suffer, how to die well.

"The only thing he doesn't teach us is how to kill. That's why I'm going to work on these things and I'm never going to support killing."

□ For more information about the life and work of Fr John Dear, visit www.johndear.org.