

This spiritual warrior fought only for peace

-David Waters

If he were alive today, Gerry Vanderhaar probably would have spent the Fourth of July standing quietly on a Memphis street corner practicing his faith.

“That which we care about most defines our real faith,” Vanderhaar wrote in the first chapter of his most recent book, “Beyond Violence: In the Spirit of the Non-Violent Christ.”

“That which we value more than anything else defines the direction of our life.”

For Dr. Gerard Vanderhaar, who died June 21 at age 73, there was little doubt about what defined his life and faith.

It’s what he felt as a child among the Cistercian monks, Christian Brothers, Benedictine nuns and Sisters of Charity who live in and around Louisville, Ky.

It’s what he saw in their lives, what called him to the priesthood.

It’s what he learned among the Dominicans, the order of preachers who became followers of Jesus, the Prince of Peace.

“My peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you, but not as the world gives it.”

It’s what he was told in Rome during the time of the Second Vatican Council:

“All Christians are urgently summoned to do in love what the truth requires, and to join with all true peacemakers in pleading for peace and bringing it about.”

It was in the hope he heard in JFK:

“So let us not rest all our hopes on parchment and on paper, let us strive to build peace, a desire for peace, a willingness to work for peace in the hearts and minds of all of our people.”

It was in the challenge he heard in MLK:

“It is not enough to say we must not wage war. It is necessary to love peace and sacrifice for it. We must concentrate not merely on the negative expulsion of war but on the positive affirmation of peace.”

It was in the example he saw in Gandhi:

“We must be the change we wish to see.”

It was in the courage and wisdom he found in his mentor, Bishop Carroll Dozier of Memphis.

“The just war theory belongs in the same drawer as the flat earth theory.”

It was in the love and faithfulness he found with Janice, his wife of 35 years:

“Our marriage was a peace-making vocation.”

It was what he worked for as founder or co-founder of Pax Christi USA, the Mid-South Peace and Justice Center, the M.K. Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence and the West Tennessee Peace Project.

It’s why he spoke gently and quietly, closed doors softly and smiled often.

It’s what he wrote about in his books and speeches and letters to the editor.

It’s why he spent countless hours on Memphis sidewalks and street corners, holding up signs against capital punishment, war and other forms of violence.

It’s what he taught generations of students at Christian Brothers University.

Blessed are the peacemakers.

Peace is a gift and a task.

Peace begins at home.

Peace is the means and the end.

Peace like a river.

Peace in every step.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding.

Peace be with you.

Dr. Gerard Anthony Vanderhaar: 1931-2005.

Rest in peace.

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