News



Martha Hennessy, Mark Colville, Clare Grady, Carmen Trotta, Patrick O'Neill and Liz McAlister stand outside the U.S. District Courthouse in Brunswick, Georgia, on Oct. 24, 2019, just after their trial. (Wikimedia Commons/Bones Donovan)



Dennis Sadowski

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The days are long for Martha Hennessy as she waits in a Manchester, New Hampshire, halfway house to hear from federal prison authorities about how soon freedom will come.

Corresponding with friends via cellphone, continuing a daily cycle of prayer and Mass readings, writing in her journal and practicing *Lectio Divina* allows her to stay focused on continuing to be "a Catholic prisoner of conscience and for nuclear abolition."

She told Catholic News Service June 9 she had been outdoors only once while at the halfway house: to walk a few blocks to Sunday Mass at St. Catherine of Siena Church three days earlier.

"They don't even tell you what's going on," said Hennessy, 66.

The halfway house, where she has been since May 26, is Hennessy's most recent stop more than three years into a journey that began with her illegal entry the night of April 4-5, 2018, into Naval Submarine Base Kings Bay in St. Marys, Georgia, the East Coast home of the Trident submarine.

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Hennessy and six other Catholics, who call themselves the Kings Bay Plowshares, cut through a fence and walked in small groups to different locales on the base. One group reached what they believed to be nuclear missile bunkers. Another made it to a missile display and office buildings where they spray-painted peace messages. Each group read Scripture and prayed until discovered by Navy security.

Military experts believe each Trident submarine carries dozens of nuclear weapons. The U.S. government policy is to neither confirm nor deny such is the case.

For the action, Hennessy and the others were found guilty of four federal offenses and ordered to pay a share of the $33,503.51 in damage the Navy said they caused. In November, a federal judge sentenced Hennessy to 10 months of incarceration. In May, Hennessy, the granddaughter of Catholic Worker movement co-founder Dorothy Day, was released from the minimum-security Federal Correctional Institution Danbury in Connecticut, after serving half her sentence.

Carmen Trotta, a Catholic Worker in New York City, joined Hennessy in the anti-nuclear protest. He was released from the minimum-security Federal Correctional Institution Otisville in New York, after serving about half his 14-month sentence.

The action at the naval base was the most recent under the plowshares banner that began in 1980. The protests are rooted in the Book of Isaiah's call to "beat their swords into plowshares."

The other Kings Bay Plowshares participants are Jesuit Fr. Steve Kelly of the Bay Area in California; Elizabeth McAlister of New London, Connecticut; and Catholic Workers Mark Colville of New Haven, Connecticut, Patrick O'Neill of Garner, North Carolina, and Clare Grady of Ithaca, New York. The three Catholic Workers remain in prison.

The halfway houses in New York were full so Trotta was released to the custody of friend, attorney and fellow Catholic Worker Matthew Daloisio, his wife, Amanda, and two children. He must wear an ankle monitor, however, and call to report any time he wants to leave the Daloisio family's apartment — even to take out the trash.

"They're treating a 58-year-old man like a 6-year-old," he said.

And Trotta is not allowed to visit the New York Catholic Worker's St. Joseph House and Maryhouse a few blocks away. Mass at a nearby Catholic church is OK though, he said.

Trotta told CNS June 8 that he wanted to be released to St. Joseph House so that he could serve meals and offer hospitality to homeless people, as he has for 34 years. Federal prison officials denied his request, citing the continuing threat posed by COVID-19.

Since returning to New York, Trotta has worked with a case manager and other U.S. Bureau of Prison officials who insist he "reintegrate" into society by finding a job. They have offered to help him write a resume, he said.

"But they don't understand where I'm coming from," he said, describing how he committed to living a life of voluntary poverty in his mid-20s. "I haven't had a bank account since 1985."

Even in prison, Trotta refused a formal paying job because he did not want his wages to go toward the restitution he owes.

"I refuse to pay restitution to that genocidal criminal conspiracy, which is what that base down in Georgia is," he told CNS.

Instead, he accepted the task of cleaning two bathrooms every day but Sunday. "Apparently, I was really good at it," he said. "Everyone congratulated me for it."

Despite his release from Otisville, Trotta continues to serve his prison term, which ends Nov. 23. His case manager "reminds me it's not that far away," he said.



Martha Hennessy, granddaughter of Dorothy Day, speaks at an anti-ROTC protest Nov. 3, 2016, at Marquette University in Milwaukee. (Wikimedia Commons/Susan Ruggles)

In New Hampshire, Hennessy told CNS she is hoping soon to be released to home confinement for the remaining months of her prison term.

Not knowing when or if she will be allowed to travel the 100 miles to her home in eastern Vermont to be with her husband, Scott Melanson, and her grandchildren is troubling, Hennessy said.

She described her time in prison as "difficult, very stressful." She was placed in quarantine for three weeks when she arrived in Danbury in December because of the coronavirus pandemic. She had no access to writing tools, a telephone, adequate clothing or even toothpaste at first.

"It took three days to get me toilet paper. I had to bang on the door so they could let me out to use the toilet. I went two weeks without a hair comb," said Hennessy, who has long hair.

When Hennessy was finally able to mix with the other women at Danbury, there was little for anyone to do. The pandemic forced prison officials to suspend most programming. "So I kept busy reading, writing, praying and a daily exercise routine outside," she said.

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Hennessy explained that she saw deficiencies in physical and mental health care for the women at Danbury, many of whom were convicted of nonviolent crimes involving money scams and gambling.

"A lot of women who were in there did not need to be in there. The judicial system, it's corrupt, it's a money-making scheme. That's the biggest concern I have. The system is punitive and profiteering. It has nothing to do with restorative justice," Hennessy said.

Despite the upheaval in their lives, especially since entering prison late in 2020, both Hennessy and Trotta said they have no regrets for their plowshares action.

For Hennessy, silence is not an option.

For Trotta, "It was the right thing to do."