

Catonsville Nine, an early model for religious protest

Patrick O'Neill | Jun. 2, 2008

By PATRICK O'NEILL

CATONSVILLE, Md. -- Their tactics and their message were unsettling, but few can deny that this renegade group of Roman Catholics, who became known as the Catonsville Nine, forever changed the Catholic discussion in this country about war and peace.

The group had decided to ramp up resistance to the Vietnam War when they entered the Catonsville, Md., Selective Service offices on May 17, 1968. They removed 1-A draft files and burned them in the parking lot of the Patapsco Council of the Knights of Columbus Hall, in which the Selective Service leased office space.

The group, which included six religious or former religious, was arrested, tried and imprisoned.

In the decades since, thousands of Catholics have joined protests and been arrested at weapons sites, military bases and weapons testing facilities in demonstrating against U.S. military policies.

The action of the Catonsville Nine set off a rash of similar draft board raids, and forced the nation to reassess its views of the war. Within the church, the action of the protesters raised questions about the nature of religious vocation. At the same time, the sight of Catholic priests and nuns being arrested divided opinion. Some thought that vowed religious had no place in such activities while others were inspired to become active in peace activities from a religious and faith perspective.

A series of gatherings to commemorate the Catonsville action were held throughout May in the Baltimore area. Only five of the nine activists are still living, and only one attended the observances.

Sr. Mary Jeremy Daigler, a Sister of Mercy, was teaching in a Baltimore Catholic school when the news broke of the Catonsville action.

"I can remember teaching the diverse group of students that sat in front of me about the fundamental rightness of that prophetic action," Daigler said. "That was hard for them to hear, but it was the first time that I found myself saying out loud, in words, what was so basically true for a Christian to be saying; what the Catonsville Nine and other [similar groups] were saying with their actions. It was a profoundly moving period of history that I felt a part of.

"I have not made the choices that would enable me to be part of those actions, but they have informed and shaped my spirituality."

The best-known member of the Catonsville Nine was the late Josephite priest, Philip Berrigan, who died in 2002. Berrigan had participated in another draft board raid, the 1967 action known as the Baltimore Four, where he and three others poured blood on draft files. The four were awaiting sentencing when Berrigan and another member of the Baltimore Four, the late Tom Lewis, joined the Catonsville group, which also included Philip's

brother, Jesuit Fr. Daniel Berrigan.

In a statement about the action, Daniel Berrigan wrote: "Our apologies good friends, for the fracture of good order, the burning of paper instead of children, the angering of the orderlies in the front parlor of the charnel house. We could not, so help us God, do otherwise." He later produced a play, "The Trial of the Catonsville 9."

John Hogan, 66, now living in Connecticut, decided to join the Catonsville Nine following a stint as a Maryknoll brother serving in Guatemala.

"Basically, I just see what we did then was in response to what happened then, and something had to be done about it, and the nine of us got together to try to do something about it," said Hogan, as he stood on the stoop of Viva House, the Baltimore Catholic Worker community that was hosting a recent tribute to Tom Lewis and the Catonsville Nine. Lewis, who had been planning to return for the anniversary festivities, died unexpectedly on April 4. Lewis' mother, brother and sister, all of whom supported the Catonsville action, were also at the gathering.

"I was thankful for Philip Berrigan, because he kind of pretty much showed the way; he and of course Tom Lewis," Hogan said. "They had acted already, and then they stood trial and were awaiting sentencing and decided to act again. So I have a lot of admiration for that because to do it once is one thing, but to do it while you're waiting to be sentenced for jail, you know you're going to get hit hard with a heavier sentence."

Hogan, soft-spoken and self-effacing, said, "From the time when you're raised by your parents and you have all of these things that have accumulated over the years, this is where you are. ? you think of the Vietnam War and you see at that time the pictures coming out of the place and you heard the reports, and the amount of men being killed, and the people over there being killed. It was just an enormous thing. How can you not react to it?"

Hogan, the only member of the Catonsville Nine to return for the 40th anniversary events, said his Catholicism "did have a strong influence" in his decision to act. ?I'm certainly happy that it happened to me, I'll tell you that."

Shortly after his arrival at Viva House, Hogan was met by Berrigan's widow, Elizabeth McAlister, one of the many unindicted Catonsville Nine coconspirators who now speak openly and usually proudly of their association with the action.

"You were really committed to getting all those files burned; it was wonderful," McAlister told Hogan, a reference to black and white news footage of the action that shows Hogan reaching into the burning fire and shaking the files out of a wire basket so all of them would actually be destroyed. Some speculate that the action may have saved the lives of some men who would have been sent to the war because it was later determined the Selective Service did not maintain backup files.

Contacted by telephone at his Minnesota home, Catonsville participant George Mische, 71, said he visited 80 U.S. Catholic bishops in the two years leading up to his participation in the action to ask them to condemn the war. Only four bishops openly opposed the war, he said.

"The overwhelming majority of bishops in this country and Cardinal Spellman were absolutely, fundamentally, morally bankrupt," Mische said, "as they are today on Iraq."

Stephen Sachs, the U.S. attorney who prosecuted the Catonsville case, and who later became Maryland Attorney General, said the nine were wrong to take the law into their own hands.

"In a democracy that's an intolerable position," Sachs said in a front page story about the Catonsville action in the May 17 edition of *The Baltimore Sun*. "No one can, and no one did at the time, contest the sincerity, one

might even say the bravery, of these folks."

In an interview on National Public Radio, Sachs said: "You can't just burn what you hate. The key to democracy is process."

(Patrick O'Neill is a freelance religion journalist living in Garner, N.C.)

Source URL (retrieved on 09/27/2016 - 06:44): <https://www.ncronline.org/news/catonsville-nine-early-model-religious-protest>