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The Camden 28

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

On Aug. 22, 1971, a large group of anti-war activists, including four priests and a Lutheran minister, were arrested and indicted for trying to destroy files from the draft board, FBI offices and the Army Intelligence office in the Federal Building in Camden, N.J. As they made their first moves, police and FBI officers materialized from nowhere and surrounded them. Turns out, one among them was an FBI informant.

Had they been convicted, some of them, including my friend Jesuit Fr. Ned Murphy, would have faced up to 47 years in prison. But after a spectacular trial, a jury acquitted them. An excellent new documentary has been made to tell the story.

The government dubbed the group "The Camden 28," and that's the name of this inspiring new film by filmmaker Anthony Giacchino, which premiered in New York City this summer, and earned *The New York Times'* praise, "the best film playing in town."

Following upon the Berrigans and their Catonsville Nine action, the Camden activists were determined to use nonviolent civil disobedience to denounce the war on Vietnam as immoral and to prevent the government from sending their local youth faraway to be killed.

"The war is not a topic to be discussed during the trial," the judge intoned at the start. "Protest is not an

acceptable legal defense, as sincerely motivated as I think they were." Yet after three-and-a-half months of trial and three days of deliberations, a jury of seven women and five men returned a verdict of "not guilty" on all charges. The acquittals represented the first full legal victory for the anti-war movement in more than five years and dozens of such draft board actions.

Among the 28, 26 were Catholic. And indeed, between 1967 and 1971, Catholics claimed responsibility for more than 30 draft board raids and for the destruction of close to a million Selective Service documents.

The defense during the trial was a exemplar of audacity. Each defendant asked the jury to "nullify the laws" against breaking and entering. They appealed to the 12 to acquit them and send a signal to the government that the war itself was "illegal and immoral."

They asked for acquittal too on grounds that the raid wouldn't have gone forward without the help of the self-admitted FBI informer and provocateur. The members themselves had given up on the plan as impracticable until the provocateur urged them on and provided the means.

The film is heartrending and brimming with shocking revelations. We learn that President Richard Nixon himself, along with his chief of staff H.R. Haldeman and FBI director J. Edgar Hoover decided personally to go after the group -- a clear violation of separation of powers. It was a clear attempt to target the so-called "Catholic Left."

The film brims, too, with poignant turns. In the middle of everything, the informant, who had been a dear friend of several of the activists, lost his young son to an accident. One of the defendants, Fr. Mick Doyle, presided at the funeral. The church filled with family and friends, members of the FBI and the indicted activists.

The ambience of grief warmed icy hearts and set a mood of forgiveness and reconciliation. Later, when the informant himself began to see how the FBI and the U.S. government had used and lied to him, he refused to cooperate any further.

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Finally came the trial. Howard Zinn brilliantly testified under oath about how the Pentagon and presidents lied about Vietnam, and waged the war in order to steal the natural resources of the region. Sitting front row was Elizabeth Good, the well-respected mother of one of the defendants. Her other son had recently been killed in Vietnam.

As Zinn finished his devastating testimony, she burst into sobs, a cry that testified to an absurdity that couldn't be escaped. A realization descended: her one son had died in vain; now the government had set its sites on the other who dared say no to the needless killing. The absurdity broke her heart and swayed

everyone in the courtroom, including the judge and the jury.

Defendants made other unwelcome connections, for instance, between Vietnam and the war zone of Camden, one of the poorest, most disenfranchised cities in the nation. Fr. Doyle, pastor of a Camden parish, then and now, testified last saying that because people die in Vietnam, they die concomitantly in Camden and elsewhere. Fr. Doyle continues ministering to this day at his Camden parish. Poverty has worsened, he said, and wars rage on.

By no means is the film impartial. Here was a group that acted conscientiously, in the spirit of the civilly disobedient Jesus, who turned over tables in the temple to confront imperial and religious injustice. Here was a group of dedicated citizens and Christians, acting on faith and conscience, who responded to the horror of the U.S. government's war on Vietnam. At the reunion of the defendants, it's clear that this action was one of the greatest experiences of their lives.

In taking such a point of view, the film bears a Gospel message of sorts. It challenges us to ask how we ourselves are responding to the horror of the U.S. government's war on Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine. Even though I was found guilty in court last week, the film urges me to keep on engaging the courts and the law which legalizes war and weapons of mass destruction until war itself is one day outlawed.

I highly recommend this powerful documentary for church and peace groups, (and check local PBS channels to see if it will be airing this fall). And I hope it will inspire us toward the Gospel's idealistic heights.

For more information on "The Camden 28," www.camden28.org and to order the film, go to: www.firstrunfeatures.com. John will be speaking this week in Springfield, Ill., and Chicago, and next week in Las Cruces, N.M. and Tuscon, Ariz. For info, see: www.johndear.org.

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