

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

May 20, 2008 at 2:37pm

The Catonsville Nine 40 years later

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

Yesterday (May 19) commemorates an historic occasion. It marks 40 years since the shattering gesture of the Catonsville Nine, those illustrious Catholic resisters, including Daniel and Philip Berrigan. With intent and purpose, they entered a draft board center in the Knights of Columbus Hall near Baltimore, and there they hauled draft files out to the parking lot and, in a bonfire of home-made napalm, set them ablaze.

The action made news around the world -- not only because U.S. citizens had the temerity to take nonviolent action to end the war, but because behind it lay a scathing symbol: napalm. They deployed in resistance the same weapon the U.S. deployed in belligerence upon the children of Vietnam. And as the files shriveled in the flames, they let loose the Pentecostal flames of peace. Their action sparked scores of similar draft board raids and heated up nonviolent resistance to the Vietnam war. The nation found the whole thing shocking.

And all the more so because the action was pulled off by Catholics, two of them priests. This week, I'll be pondering this event with several Jesuit friends and Daniel Berrigan, on Block Island, Rhode Island, at the hermitage William Stringfellow built for him. Dan just turned 87, and has a new book out, *The Kings and Their Gods: The Pathology of Power* (Eerdmans).

"I had no right but for the love of you," Dar Williams sings in her song about Dan and the Catonsville Nine.

The artist Tom Lewis was also one of the swashbuckling Nine. Later, in 1980, he joined Dan and Phil in the first Plowshares disarmament action. All his life was given over to engaging in civil disobedience and resisting death. All his life he fostered life -- through painting, community-building and serving the poor. He was to speak at several commemorations, but last month he died in his sleep on the 40th anniversary of Dr. King's death.

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Thanks to Dan, Tom and the others, the Catonsville action pushed the U.S. Catholic church a large step forward. The action showed that we were not medieval, but involved, active, revolutionary. Even more, the action showed the church was willing to take up where the Acts of the Apostles left off. We too could carry on the peacemaking life of the nonviolent Jesus.

All nine deserve our thanks and appreciation. We owe it to them to reflect and understand, to catch their spirit of resistance and follow their exemplary ways. "The act was pitiful," Daniel Berrigan wrote later, "a tiny flare amid the consuming fires of war."

But Catonsville was like a firebreak, a small fire lit to contain and conquer a greater. The time, the place, were weirdly right. They spoke for passion, symbol, reprisal. Catonsville seemed to light up the dark places of the heart, where courage and risk and hope were awaiting a signal, a dawn.

For the remainder of our lives, the fires would burn and burn, in hearts and minds, in draft boards, in prisons and courts. A new fire, new as a Pentecost, flared up in eyes deadened and hopeless, the noble powers of soul given over to the "powers of the upper air."

Much has changed since those fiery days in the spring of 1968, shortly after Dr. King's assassination, and shortly before Bobby Kennedy's. Today many Catholics, even priests, regularly speak out against war, thanks to groups like Pax Christi. Some commit civil disobedience. Among us is a courageous bishop, our own Oscar Romero, a prophet of peace in our own midst: Bishop Thomas Gumbleton.

On the other hand, much remains the same. War continues, racism and poverty and corporate greed go on. Indeed, the world seems all the more hell-bent.

But recalling the derring-do of the Catonsville Nine cheers us. Be inspired by these heroic church folk to stand up and likewise be counted. Be inspired by their own words, this statement written by Daniel Berrigan (published in "Night Flight to Hanoi"). Dan composed it a few days before the action, while sitting in the Portland, Maine, airport. I offer an excerpt here that it might stir us to light the disarming fires of Pentecost, that it might move us to help put an end to our raging wars today.

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Next week nine of us will, if all goes well (ill?) take our religious bodies to a draft entry near Baltimore. There we shall, of purpose and forethought, remove the A-1 files, sprinkle them in the public street with homemade napalm and set them afire. For which act we shall, beyond doubt, be placed behind bars for some portion of our natural lives, in consequence of our inability to live and die content in the plagued city, to say peace peace when there is no peace, to keep the poor poor, the homeless homeless, the thirsty and hungry thirsty and hungry.

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.

For we are sick at heart, our hearts give us no rest for thinking of the Land of Burning Children. And for thinking of that other Child, of whom the poet Luke speaks? Small consolation; a child born to make trouble, and to die for it ?

We act against the law at a time of the Poor Peoples' March, at a time, moreover, when the government is announcing even more massive paramilitary means to confront disorder in the cities. The implications of all this must strike horror in the mind of the thinking person. The war in Vietnam is more and more literally being brought home to us. Its inmost meaning strikes the American ghettos: one war, one crime against the poor, waged (largely) by the poor, in servitude to the affluent. We resist and protest this crime.

Finally, we stretch out our hands to our brothers and sisters throughout the world. We who are priests, to our fellow priests. All of us who act against the law, turn to the poor of the world, to the Vietnamese, to the victims, to the soldiers who kill and die; for the wrong reasons, for no reason at all, because they were so ordered -- by the authorities of that public order which is in effect a massive institutionalized disorder.

We say killing is disorder. Life and gentleness and community and unselfishness is the only order we recognize. For the sake of that order, we risk our liberty, our good name. The time is past when good people can remain silent, when obedience can segregate people from public risk, when the poor can die without defense.

We ask our fellow Christians to consider in their hearts a question that has tortured us, night and day, since the war began:

How many must die before our voices are heard, how many must be tortured, dislocated, starved, maddened? How long must the world's resources be raped in the service of legalized murder? When, at what point, will you say no to this war?

We wish also to place in question by this act all suppositions about normal times, longings for an untroubled life in a somnolent church, that neat timetable of ecclesiastical renewal, which in respect to the needs of people, amounts to another form of time serving.

Redeem the times! The times are inexpressibly evil. Christians pay conscious -- indeed religious -- tribute to Caesar and Mars; by approval of overkill tactics, by brinkmanship, by nuclear liturgies, by racism, by support of genocide. They embrace their society with all their heart, and abandon the cross. They pay lip service to Christ and military service to the powers of death

And yet, and yet, the times are inexhaustibly good, solaced by the courage and hope of many. The truth rules, Christ is not forsaken. In a time of death, some men and women -- the resisters, those who work hardily for social change, those who preach and embrace the unpalatable truth -- such men and women overcome death, their lives are bathed in the light of the resurrection, the truth has set them free. In the jaws of death, of contumely, of good and ill report, they proclaim their love of the people

We think of such men and women in the world, in our nation, in the churches, and the stone in our breast is dissolved. We take heart once more.

For further info on the Catonsville Nine, see

www.jonahhouse.org. John Dear's forthcoming autobiography, "A Persistent Peace," will come out on August 1st, and is featured at www.persistentpeace.com. For further information about his writings, speaking schedule, and fall book tour, see: www.johndear.org.

Source URL (retrieved on 08/17/2017 - 10:58): <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/road-peace/catonsville-nine-40-years-later>

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