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Berrigan's message to peacemakers: Persevere

by Joshua J. McElwee

Remembering Daniel Berrigan

Editor's note: We are reposting this 2010 story on Jesuit Fr. Dan Berrigan's talk Nov. 29, 2010, at Mount Manresa Jesuit Retreat House in Staten Island, N.Y.



Jesuit Fr. Dan Berrigan speaks at Mount Manresa Jesuit Retreat House on Staten Island, N.Y., Nov. 29. (Photos by Kenan Malkic)

STATEN ISLAND, NY -- A breathless hush filled the overflowing room at Mount Manresa Jesuit Retreat House here as Jesuit Fr. Dan Berrigan slowly approached the podium. Organizers and audience seemed painfully conscious there wouldn't be many more times this 89-year-old Catholic peace icon -- whose life has been punctuated with countless arrests and prison time, and guided by an unyielding commitment to Christian nonviolent resistance -- would appear in a public forum.

Now frail and bent, he carried with him to the front of the room not only more than a solid half century of peace work but also many associations with other peacemakers, including his late brother, Philip, and, on

the 30th anniversary of her death, the cofounder of the Catholic Worker movement, Dorothy Day.

The Nov. 29 talk was billed as Berrigan's reflection on Day. But as with any other Berrigan talk, it would cut to the essence and contain a message for his audience. And what would this peace message on this evening be?

Persevere.

'You have no right to tie yourself in knots because you want to know the outcome of what you are doing. Don't, no, no. Let it go. Let it go into history. Let it go into Christ. Let it go into generations. Let it go into the children. Play it and pray it well.'

This was pure Berrigan, speaking in a soft and wispy voice that those who had gathered often needed to lean forward to hear. Wearing an old sweater and with blue long johns visible under the tattered cuffs of his khaki pants, this unassuming man reached into ancient scripture. He cited the second chapter of Isaiah -- 'They shall beat their swords into plowshares' -- as he reflected on Day's long-ranging impact on him as well as on the wider world.

Berrigan noted Day's cautionary wisdom that 'we may never see the good outcome of the good we do,' adding, as Day taught, that we must 'do it anyway.'

Each of us must think, Berrigan told the audience, that 'I am going turn swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. I may never see the transformation myself. It makes no difference. I shall do it. I shall do it.'

**For the implications of Berrigan's talk on U.S. military policy see *NCR's* editorial:
Quiet cancer of militarism on the US soul**

Organizers had worked for months to bring the Manhattan-based priest to neighboring Staten Island, and to the retreat house for what Fred Herron, interim executive director, called 'a little moment in history.'

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The talk also provided an occasion for other Catholics to reflect on and assess Berrigan's impact on the wider Catholic community.

'I'm glad to say that in the long run it's really coming into focus now,' Jesuit Fr. Ray Schroth said in a telephone interview. 'What has Dan Berrigan been to us? Two words come to mind. First: prophet. And then: teacher. ... Dan really takes the fact of God being in the world seriously and feels he's got to get out there. And over the years he's compelled us to come with him.'

It's not easy to book Berrigan. He rarely speaks at public events. Herron said retreat center organizers had been trying to get him to speak for years with no success.

But this time was different, falling during the 100th anniversary of the center, which, according to Herron, was the first retreat house founded with the principal intention of serving the laity.

Maternal pride

The talk also allowed late cementing of a special connection between Berrigan and Day. Robert Ellsberg,

publisher of Orbis Books and editor of *The Duty of Delight* and *All the Way to Heaven*, collections of Day's diaries and letters, said that Day thought of Dan and Phil Berrigan as "her children."

"She had relationships with many priests over her life, but the way that the Berrigans courageously took on the peace witness and were willing to go to prison was very important to her," said Ellsberg in a telephone interview. "She felt a lot of maternal pride in their witness and the fact that they drew so much inspiration from the *Catholic Worker*."

Speaking to *NCR* in a brief interview following his talk, Berrigan described his close, sometimes complicated relationship with Day. It began in spurts as the priest brought his students from St. Peter's College in Jersey City, N.J., to the *Catholic Worker* in New York in the 1940s. It faltered, however, after Berrigan's arrest in Catonsville, Md., for burning draft records.

In May 1968, Berrigan was among nine men and women who entered a Selective Service office, removed several hundred draft records, and burned them with homemade napalm in protest against the war in Vietnam.

Berrigan said he and Day didn't talk much directly about the action, but she said clearly that it wasn't "the way of the *Catholic Worker*."

Looking back, Berrigan seemed almost wistful about that separation between him and his longtime mentor.

"The more I reflect on it, the more I wish we had talked [more about the action]. Because I don't think there was that much difference [between us]. I think basic to her thinking was what I might call the cultural atmosphere of the '60s at the *Worker*, which was very difficult for her. There was a lot of craziness going on, a lot of sexual stuff.

"She was very hurt and bewildered by all this, and I think she carried that over into a sense of bewilderment of "Well, what are these people doing now? This is very dangerous. This will result in violence."

"Which it never did. It never did. We had beautifully trained people who were nonviolent in principle. But I wish we had talked. I think we were closer than she allowed, and that she was influenced by other events."

The daily grind

It's easy to imagine why those "other events" of the '60s, coupled with the daily grind of life, might have come between Day and Berrigan after Catonsville. As those who have lived and worked in a *Catholic Worker* house know well, life within is often a mess of constant activity: filling coffeepots, sweeping floors, baking bread, finding a place for an unexpected guest to sleep -- sometimes with little room for rest, let alone relationship.

According to Ellsberg, it was precisely that mix of the routine that was the primary context for Day's entire understanding of her life.

?People tend to think of Dorothy Day or the Berrigans as picket lines and jails and protesting and sitting in,? said Ellsberg. ?Yes, their lives were marked by those kind of dramatic forms of witness. But just as heroic was the majority of their lives that was spent in very mundane ways, and as you see in Day?s diaries, the whole experience of the everyday was an arena for the practice of holiness.?

And what exactly does this mess achieve? What?s the impact?

In his talk, Berrigan said the answer is not found in the hope of any immediate outcome, but simply in doing good.

?I think Dorothy ... said in effect I may never know the outcome of what I?m going to do, but I?m going to do it anyway,? he said.

?We may never see the good outcome of the good we do. Do it anyway. Concentrate on the goodness of the work you?re doing. The outcome will take care of itself. The outcome is no concern of yours.?

Working out salvation

Berrigan said he now focuses his primary efforts on building community. It is a theme that has resonated through his -- and Day?s -- life.

For some, Berrigan might seem to some an odd proponent of community life. His relationship with other Jesuits has at times been tenuous. It?s a relationship that placed him in an exile of sorts to Latin America in 1965 after his provincial became upset with his connections and action within the peace movement and the Catholic Worker community.

Recalling an example of the tension between Berrigan and a friend, Schroth said that when Berrigan met Jesuit Fr. Robert Drinan for the first time in 1972, he immediately questioned Drinan about his run for a U.S. Congressional seat.

Schroth, author of a recently published biography of Drinan, said that Berrigan told Drinan that while he appreciated his opposition to the Vietnam War, ?by running for office you involve yourself in the power structure in a way that inevitably is going to compromise you.?

In the eyes of some, it may be Berrigan?s struggle within community that has most closely aligned him with Day.

Community life was ?a context in which [Day] had to work out her salvation,? said Ellsberg. ?It was a source of incredible frustration, disappointment and anguish.?

Yet, ?in community there was a lesson for everybody about what it means to be human and the context in which we are called to achieve our salvation -- because our salvation ultimately depends on love. And you can?t love all by yourself. Love is something that?s worked out in relationship to other people.?

More than six decades after Berrigan began introducing others to the Catholic Worker movement, having become personally enamored by Day?s life and dedication to hospitality and nonviolence, the priest quietly pondered a question put to him: ?Where do we go from here??

‘Everything,’ he responded, ‘comes out of a community sense that we can do something together, that we can face our fears and our future and our families because we are out of community, and our community is at least relatively independent of success.’

Pausing, then closing his thought, he added, grinning: ‘It’d better be.’

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DOROTHY DAY

Born: Nov. 8, 1897
Died: Nov. 29, 1980

American journalist, social activist, Catholic convert, Christian anarchist. Worked closely with French immigrant Peter Maurin to found the first Catholic Worker, an intentional Christian community in New York City combining aid for the economically impoverished with nonviolent peace action. Starting with the publication of the Catholic Worker newspaper in 1933, her model inspired creation of similar communities worldwide. It continues today, with close to 200 Catholic Worker communities in the U.S. and abroad. Her autobiography, *The Long Loneliness*, was published in 1952. Day’s account of the Catholic Worker, *Loaves and Fishes*, was published in 1963. A collection of her letters, *All the Way to Heaven*, was released in October.

DANIEL BERRIGAN

Born: May 9, 1921

Jesuit priest, poet, peace activist. A college professor and Lamont Poetry Prize-winning poet before the Vietnam War, he became involved in antiwar activism at brother Philip’s insistence. Member of the ‘Catonsville Nine,’ a group of Catholic protesters who broke into the Catonsville, Md., draft board on May 17, 1968, and destroyed its draft files using homemade napalm. Before spending three years in prison for the action, he successfully evaded arrest by the FBI for four months. He and Philip were for a time on the FBI Ten Most Wanted Fugitives list. Along with six others on Sept. 9, 1980, the two brothers trespassed on to the General Electric Nuclear Missile facility in King of Prussia, Pa., where they damaged nuclear warhead nose cones and poured blood onto documents and files. That action spawned the Plowshares movement, a collection of anti-nuclear-weapons protests inspired by Isaiah’s call to ‘beat swords into plowshares.’

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