

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

March 25, 2011 at 1:56pm

Behind peace witness, a prophetic, transforming priest

by Joshua J. McElwee



Fr. Jack McCaslin gestures while speaking in his apartment March 11. (NCR photos/Joshua J. McElwee)

OMAHA, NEB. -- Fr. Jack McCaslin can't remember how many times he's been arrested.

As he sits in a brown reclining chair in his room at a retirement community here, he takes his glasses off and starts turning them over in his hands, pulling at the temples. "I don't know how many," he says at first, pausing to consider. "About 40, I think?"

After a moment more of contemplation, a wry, crooked smile crawls across his 82-year-old face, bunching up the wrinkled skin of his cheeks toward his eyes. "But I've only spent 30 days in jail!" he adds, his voice now finding a higher pitch and filling with excitement. "My fellow crooks call me 'Teflon Jack'?"

The archdiocesan priest slowly puts his glasses back on and lowers his head. Another moment later the excitement disappears. He raises his eyes and with his voice now a whisper says, "But this time, I don't know if I'm going to slip through."

Over five decades, McCaslin has been at the center of acts of civil disobedience. It started in Selma, Ala., when he joined the Freedom Riders in 1964. Then, when George Wallace visited Omaha in 1968, he led a "welcoming" ceremony for the segregationist Alabama governor that saw high-school and college students mass to protest.

Over time, the acts of resistance became something more regular. Starting sometime in the 1970s -- McCaslin can't quite remember when -- he, along with whoever else would show up outside the imposing gates of the secured facility on the outskirts of Omaha, started protesting at Offutt Air Force Base, home of the U.S. Strategic Air Command (now known as STRATCOM), responsible for the planning and targeting of the nation's nuclear weapons.

Over the years, McCaslin has held vigils and rallies, and stepped over the line onto the base in protest -- with arrest after arrest, but little legal consequence to show for it.



It's a legacy that led Jesuit Fr. M. Dennis Hamm, a theologian at Creighton University, to comment that McCaslin's persistence has highlighted "what it means to be a Christian."

McCaslin's continued willingness to protest shows that a Christian "must practice what you believe," Hamm said. "When you see public policy that violates our moral vision, you make a public stand. ... If the only way you can make your point is to do something that even causes you to be put into jail, you suffer the consequences of it willingly."

It's also a legacy that has at times perplexed and frustrated McCaslin's archdiocese, which Jerry Ebner, a member of the Omaha Catholic Worker, said draws support from parishioners stationed at the military installation.

"There are pastors I know that are afraid to even mention [Offutt] because troops and their relatives are all in our pews," Ebner said. "That's where the money comes from to keep the parishes open, so you don't mention that."

With an April 15 court date set for an Aug. 6 action at the site, at which McCaslin and three others walked about 10 steps onto the property before being arrested, the now sickly priest is not sure if he will be able to escape the consequences of this arrest like he has the others. Mark Kenney, a former naval seaman who was in the group arrested with McCaslin, was sentenced to six months in prison Feb. 25.

It's an omen that scares McCaslin and his supporters. After a flurry of hospital visits for an unknown mass in his lungs -- originally thought to be some form of cancer -- friends sent out e-mails claiming that "any jail sentence given to Fr Jack could be a "death sentence." ?

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Although doctors now think McCaslin's health problems were caused by an overly aggressive case of pneumonia, a March interview in his apartment at the retirement community found the perennial resister openly recognizing that "the years behind far outnumber those ahead" -- and trying to pin down what exactly it is he's been fighting for, what brought him to the fight in the first place, and what kind of impact it had on the lives of others.

As a "young guy?"

To those who have known McCaslin the longest, his status as a bastion of civil resistance is something of a conundrum. Ordained in 1955 when the Second Vatican Council wasn't yet on the horizon, friends say the young priest was at first far to the other side of the political spectrum -- even preaching at Mass that women shouldn't be allowed to wear pants for fear of reversed gender roles.

Jerry Sawatzki, a high-school student of McCaslin's in the '60s and now a friend, recalled one story of the priest's younger spirit. As he was walking home one day from school, Sawatzki passed by McCaslin as he was approaching a parked car outside a neighbor's home.

Inside the car, a man and a woman were talking. McCaslin went up to the car, told the man it was getting late, and said he thought it might be time for the woman "to get inside."

The man responded, simply: "This young lady happens to be my daughter. I'd appreciate it if you move along, young guy."

While McCaslin can't put his finger on any one thing that first brought about his interest in challenging civil authority, he spoke at length about that trip to Selma nearly 50 years ago.

Part of a four-person delegation to the bitterly divided city, McCaslin arrived for a weeklong visit just before Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. kicked off a campaign of civil resistance in the city. Once there, McCaslin found no place to sleep and a police force that didn't much care what collar he wore around his neck when he joined African-American protesters.

It was an experience that shook the self-righteous priest.

"In Selma, I learned that there are laws that hinder, that government can be evil in how it's fashioned," he said. "And that somebody's got to do something. You can just say this is bad news, but we have to do something about it. What we can do is break the darn law that says you can't do this, or you can't do that."

It was also an experience that shaped McCaslin's understanding of what a just society looks like.

"We were fighting for the fact that our constitution says that all men are created equal," he said. "Justice flows out of charity because people don't always do it out of their hearts, so they have to do it out of a greater sense that everybody is owed something. ..."

"Justice says that the guy on the street has the right to food enough, drink enough, clothing enough, shoes enough, and warmth enough not to die of starvation or exposure. To me, that seems to be the minimum that society owes each other. We have to figure out ways to make that happen. How do we make that happen? We don't make that happen by spending all our money making guns to go kill people, or airplanes and bombs."

Justice in the backyard

Eight years after McCaslin returned from Selma, Sawatzki met him again, at a Marriage Encounter retreat the power company employee was attending with his wife, Barb.

"I almost didn't go when I heard he would be there," said Jerry Sawatzki. "I remembered the Jack from high school."



Yet, speaking while sitting next to each other on a couch in their north Omaha home, the two grandparents agreed that the retreat with McCaslin was a crucial moment in their lives. Saying they both "probably could have been very good Republicans at the time," Barb Sawatzki called it a "turning point in our spiritual journey" that "transformed us into very radical Christians."

When the Sawatzkis' paths crossed again with McCaslin's, the priest was acting as pastor at Holy Family Parish, a medium-sized church in eastern Omaha surrounded by industrial warehouses and boarded-up buildings. It was an assignment McCaslin would hold for 12 years, between 1967 and 1979.

Arriving on the heels of Vatican II, friends remember how McCaslin made Holy Family a destination parish.

Mary Lou Lynch, who first met McCaslin in 1966 on a weekend Cursillo retreat, recalls how "people came from all over Omaha" to take part in a liturgy filled with "flourishing guitar music" and "powerful social-justice homilies."

"Our concern then was always whether there would be too many people for the old church and if we would be in trouble with the fire marshal," Lynch said. "Because of his charismatic, outgoing personality, Jack drew people. You always knew Jack was around, just by the enthusiasm of his personality and his laughter."

And what did McCaslin say to all those people who were listening to him on Sunday? Get involved in social justice ministries.

Lynch, who has become close friends with McCaslin over the years -- even helping him with his tax returns -- remembers how he and parishioners would make lunchtime sandwiches day after day for people who would walk in from the street, hungry and looking for a simple meal. She said McCaslin's housekeeper would even make them by the dozen and store them in the priest's freezer in the rectory.

Coming home after the marriage encounter retreat, the Sawatzkis were drawn into this parish circle, eventually joining Holy Family and becoming key members. And when McCaslin became involved at a burgeoning Catholic Worker house called Teresa House, they were drawn into that too, becoming regular volunteers and co-presidents of its advisory board.

It was an involvement that Barb Sawatzki never expected and one she attributes wholly to McCaslin.

"I grew up with an alcoholic father and many of the men we were serving at Teresa House were alcoholics," she said. "I never would have dreamed I would have put myself in that situation. But Jack had this way of before you knew what you were doing, you were up to your eyeballs."

‘It changed everything. And things that happened in our life and led us up to that point, we can definitely look back and see God’s hand. ... Jack was a prophet in our lives.’

Eventually, Lynch remembers, McCaslin’s concern for people in the neighborhood led him to cash in his life insurance policy and buy two houses near the parish to be used as Catholic Worker houses. First known individually as Siena House and Francis House, the houses originally provided small-scale shelter to homeless women and men. Over time they consolidated into Siena/Francis House, which, according to its Web site, is now the ‘largest provider of services to the homeless in the region.’

McCaslin, who is the ninth of 13 children, traces his concern for the people living near the parish to his mother’s example of feeding men who stopped in at their city home, hungry and looking for food.

‘Mom taught us,’ he said. ‘Justice has to start in its own backyard. Which means that it can’t happen when there are people who are filthy rich and people who are dyingly poor until the bridge is gapped.’

‘I think as a priest, I have a real opportunity to build that bridge. You can wear that collar and people look at you and listen to you better. They look at you differently. At Holy Family I tried to put what I could into action. We had to do something about it. For me, I think that sums up the whole idea of taking care of the poor.’

Being a ‘man of God’

All these years of ministry later, McCaslin is still sorting through the wide-ranging effects his priesthood has had on others. When asked what his life says about the role of the priest in the church, McCaslin first reacted by saying, ‘Priests aren’t anything special.’



Yet the aged peacemaker followed that reaction with an admission of sorts about how he ultimately sees his vocation.

‘I mean to say,’ he clarified, ‘priests are called by God to be this kind of a person, but you’re called to be this kind of a person by God, too. Everybody’s got to find which kind of a saddle to put on. My job, it seems to me, is to be first of all a man of God, a man of prayer and a man who will lead people in worship of God.’

To give an idea of how that sense of joining others in worship has carried on as McCaslin has aged, friends point to his work with inmates on death row, which continued until his sickness this February.

Jo Donegan, a member of Nebraskans Against the Death Penalty who used to make the three-hour roundtrip drive to the Tecumseh State Correctional Institution with McCaslin regularly until his health scare in February, said the priest would ‘talk furiously’ with the inmates and even became a spiritual advisor to a few of them to give them counsel.

‘He was so faithful to visit the prisoners,’ the retired psychotherapist said. ‘He helped them feel connected to God.’

It’s a sense of worship that has also created closer ties between the priest and his archdiocese. This

winter, Omaha Archbishop George Lucas accepted McCaslin's invitation to visit death row with him, the first visit by an archbishop anyone at the abolition group can remember.

Back at the retirement center, McCaslin slowly gets out of his chair, bending his back bit by bit so as not to bother his sciatica. He walks over to a photo of families gathered around an old church building. He holds it in his hands, turning it over while saying it was a gift from the parishioners at Holy Family, given to him when he was reassigned in 1979.

"I think I did good," he says in a soft voice. "The folks really appreciated what I did and what I did was try to be Christ alive for them -- to draw them into being the Christ alive in their own circle, to be an influence on whatever world they live in, so that the presence of Christ is going to be felt there as well. That's what happened. The fact is I really have a lot of friends, people whose lives I have influenced.

"If I can keep saying, 'I live now, not I, but Christ lives in me,' and then try to live accordingly, that will be the result. The people who knew Jesus really loved him and the ones who just grew up against him, they wanted to put him up on the cross. He transformed their lives. Jesus was transformed. He was deadlier than a doornail, pained and gruesome, but then he was raised up and transformed.

"The same thing happened to the apostles. They were dumb fishermen and tax collectors, and had never been 150 miles away from home, but in 300 years they were the starters of the people who transformed that whole Mediterranean basin because they got transformed by the one who was transformed: Jesus. I think that's what our goal is, one and all, to be transformed into Christ.

"A priest's job, it seems to me, is to be the transformer who's doing the transforming or leading the folks into transformation."

And what does that transformed person look like?

"I think a transformed person smiles a lot, probably cries a lot, too. It's not a painful cry. It's another kind. He smiles a lot and has a lot of really good friends who love each other.

"I think that husband and wife might be the best example of it. God is love and every bit of love there is uncreated love in God, but God shares a little bit of his uncreated love in a created way with us. Husband and wife seem to me that they have to be to each other the ones who love wildly, to teach the rest of us about what love is, that love that who is God, in the way they are with each other and with their children.

"Ultimately that flows over into society and into the circles that they move in."

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