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Plowshares activists given 15 month prison terms

Joshua J. McElwee | Mar. 29, 2011

1 year, 3 months. That?s how long Jesuit Fr. Steve Kelly and peace activist Susan Crane will be in prison following yesterday?s sentence in federal court for a four-hour act of civil disobedience they committed at a U.S. Navy nuclear weapons base in Bangor, Wash in 2009.

Kelly, 61, and Crane, 65, both members of a five-person group who call themselves the Disarm Now Plowshares, were sentenced by U.S. District Court Judge Benjamin Settle for convictions of conspiracy, trespass, destruction of property on a naval installation, and depredation of government property.

The other members of the group -- Sacred Heart Sr. Anne Montgomery, 83, Jesuit Fr. Bill Bichsel, 82, and Lynne Greenwald, 61 -- were sentenced to 2, 3, and 6 months, respectively. Montgomery and Bischel were also sentenced to electronic home monitoring after their release.

The activists were fined $5,300 each in restitution charges. They were remanded directly into federal custody following sentencing.

Speaking to *NCR* by phone immediately after the sentencing, Bill Quigley, the legal director of the Center for Constitutional Rights, said ?hundreds? of people showed up in the Tacoma, Wash., courtroom to show support for the activists, requiring extra chairs for seating.

Before Settle announced the activists? sentences, Quigley said that the judge remarked that although ?it will be a great day when [nuclear] weapons are no more,? he had to assign jail time or else ?society would deteriorate into anarchy.?

Among those testifying on behalf of the defendants in court were former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark and retired Detroit auxiliary bishop Thomas Gumbleton.

The five members of the disarmament group admitted in their Dec. 13 trial that they cut through the outer fences at Naval Base Kitsap's Bangor complex, 20 miles west of Seattle, Nov. 2, 2009. They said they then walked toward the center of the base and waited four hours before their arrest, holding a sign that read ?Disarm Now Plowshares Trident: Illegal Immoral? while scattering sunflower seeds and hammering on a roadway and fences.

The base is the West Coast home of the Trident nuclear-armed submarine. The Natural Resources Defense Council said in 2006 that 2,364 nuclear warheads are stored at the site, making up approximately 24 percent of the entire U.S. arsenal.

Quigley, who is also a member of the group?s legal support team, said the five activists? willingness to go to jail for their action shows there are ?always people who will stand up even though everybody else is sitting down and looking the other way.?

?These folks will take their rightful place in the community of people who have sacrificed for justice,? said

Quigley. ?I?m very confident that history?s going to prove they?ve taken a very important step, maybe even a prophetic step to be life affirming rather than death dealing.?

Crane, a member of the Jonah House Community in Baltimore, told *NCR* by phone Friday that she took part in the All Souls Day action as way to respond to Jesus? question in the Gospel of Mark of whether it is more lawful to ?save life or destroy it.?

?I want to say ?Hey, we?re not supposed to be doing this. We shouldn?t be taking money from the poor...and spending it on weapons,? she said.

Before yesterday?s sentencing, activists hosted a weekend of activities to mark the occasion. They invited people to gather Saturday for a prayer vigil outside the naval base. Sunday saw them come back together for a Mass that included a blessing of the activists from Jesuit Fr. Pat Lee, the provincial of the Oregon province of the Society of Jesus.

Lee?s blessing was a bookend to the support he had already given the activists two years ago. A week before their action Lee wrote a letter to Bischel, who is a member of the Jesuits? Oregon province, telling Bischel to ?respond to what is in the deepest part of your heart? and to ?go with my blessing and my prayers.?

Bischel, a co-founder of the Tacoma Catholic Worker in Tacoma, Wash., said he found Lee?s support ?heartening to all of us.? He also said he thought the activists? ability to get onto the naval base showed the need to witness ?the power of the transforming love of Christ.?

?There?s a certain aura that nonviolence does have. There?s a certain way that it does disarm,? said Bischel. ?We had to be in that place?to witness the power of the resurrection.?

With the specter of prison time facing her Friday, Montgomery, who has participated in eight plowshares actions -- five of which revolved around Trident submarines -- said she was ?not afraid? to go to jail and saw time there as a way to experience solidarity with the poor.

?It?s the only place I?ve found where I could say seriously at least I have some solidarity with people on the bottom because I have lost control of my life at this moment,? she said.

Montgomery, who was a member of the Christian Peacemaker Teams from 1995-2009, also said the activists? prison sentences reveals that the government ?really does take this seriously.?

?It reveals that they really are afraid that people will become so conscious of the danger of these weapons that more people will rise up and say ?We?ve got to stop this,?? she said. ?It?s weird that they should be afraid of us, these elderly people walking in the basement.?

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