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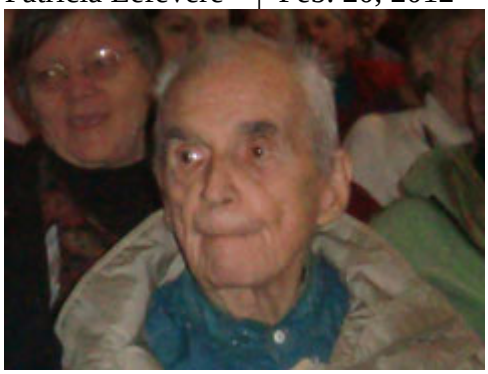
Pax Christi pays tribute to Berrigan in NY

Patricia Lefevere | Feb. 20, 2012



Jesuit Fr. Daniel Berrigan (Patricia Lefevere)

NEW YORK -- The man who for decades has stood against the powers that be needed the arm of his niece Frida Berrigan to steady him in the front-row pew of the Church of St. Joseph in Greenwich Village, and he needed help from sister-in-law Elizabeth McAlister to get to the pulpit, but once there, the power of his words filled the assembly.

Almost 91, Jesuit Fr. Daniel Berrigan -- author of 50 books, 18 of them volumes of poetry, and more than double that number of arrests for civil disobedience -- looked frail and walked haltingly, but he still commanded attention from the more than 200 people gathered here Jan. 29 for a tribute to his life and work.

The event was organized by Pax Christi Metro New York. Berrigan?s brief remarks followed a host of speakers who remembered his life in words. They were mostly his words during a two-hour tribute that included segments of his poems, essays, sermons and court testimony.

One speaker remembered Berrigan for the shortest commencement speech in history: ?Know where you stand and stand there,? was the full text. Berrigan told *NCR* he gave the address down the road a piece, pointing toward Xavier High School on West 16th Street.

Other speakers recalled his work with his Jesuit confreres, his ministering to cancer and HIV/AIDs patients in New York and the hundreds of students he had taught at universities -- Yale, Fordham, Cornell, Berkeley, the Loyolas of Los Angeles and New Orleans -- and other halls of learning.

Colleen Kelly, who lost her firefighter brother, Zachary, on 9/11, told *NCR* that Berrigan ?means so much in my life and in the lives of many 9/11 families.? Her friend Molly Welsh Kruger, a teacher of teachers who got to know Berrigan during her days at Fordham University in New York, said it was nearly impossible to say ?how much this man has impacted so many lives.?

Divine Providence Sr. Mary Jennings spoke for many when she said the message of Dan Berrigan is ?be involved with peace, forget about violence and live as Jesus would want you to live.? It is a message she tries to impart at the residence for working women that the sisters run on West 24th Street, she said.

Much of the heady days of Vietnam protest and Plowshares actions against nuclear weapons were reprised in photos, words and music supplied by a quartet of vagabond troupers from the Catholic Worker calling themselves ?The Filthy Rotten System.? They led the audience in renditions of ?How Can I Keep from Singing? and ?The Times They Are a-Changin?.?

McAlister framed her tribute to Berrigan, the younger brother of her late husband, Philip Berrigan, in an Isaiah meditation. Noting that the ancient prophet described ?an anguished people, living in a land of darkness, drenched in blood,? she reminded the audience that while they sat relaxed in Lower Manhattan, U.S. aircraft carriers, with more than 100 planes, plus missiles, guns and some 3,000 crew members, are sailing with a flotilla of destroyers, missile launchers, cruisers and submarines ?projecting U.S. power to all corners of the Earth.?

?As we gather this afternoon, we know that the U.S. isn?t the reign of God,? McAlister said, adding that U.S. drones are devastating Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan. ?The reality of our nation is violence, exploitation and terror,? the former nun and longtime peace and justice advocate said.

Her daughter Frida played a lighter note, describing her uncle as a man who has prayed, thought and acted on his feet and with his friends. She said Berrigan made a poem out of his life. ?He always had time for children, for women, for the sick and disabled, for the disenfranchised, for the castigated and the cast-asides.?

Frida said her uncle has kept ?the Gospels alive in a cynical time. ... You bring the church out of the darkness and the pomp, you free our brother Jesus from its clutches and you bring the sacraments out to us: to the soup kitchen, the picket line, the occupied block, the AIDS clinic; you bring the church to where people are.?

Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Gumbleton of Detroit thanked Berrigan for stoking his career as a peace activist. Gumbleton noted that his ordination as bishop came at the same time as Berrigan and eight others were planning the Catonsville Nine action in which they burned draft records with homemade napalm in a government office in Catonsville, Md., in May 1968.

Other priests had been active in anti-Vietnam War efforts, causing the Detroit archdiocesan chancellor to tell Gumbleton to talk to them, caution them and ?advise them to go back into the woodwork,? Gumbleton told *NCR*. ?But when they left, I realized I was on their side,? said the bishop, 82, who has spent four decades in peace work.

Gumbleton looked at Berrigan and then looked at today?s church and its leaders. ?To be against evil in our world is to be prophetic. But we?re not standing up to war or to greed. We?re not being prophetic; we?re not imitating Jesus,? Gumbleton said.

When he finally reached the pulpit and its microphone, Berrigan recited a poem he titled ?Parable? (see sidebar). ?This rounds off what I have to say,? he said, adding, ?What I have to say continues to be said elsewhere, even by silence. Continue to resist death and say yes to life.?

The assembly rose and roared.

[Patricia Lefevere is a longtime *NCR* contributor.]

Parable

Once on a time
the heart, a sure compass
voyaged
out of Madrasah,
pointing, storm
to the Land of Basilisks,
Neros
tarnished Judges, Dementia
enthroned, commissars born
tanks down.
Heart
crossed the border
surreptitiously --
was shortly seized.
Crime: ?Demeaning
the peoples? and the
state?s integrity,
displaying
for public viewing
a decadent artifact ?
?Honor, the accused was
apprehended
distributing in a public
place
leaves ?Entitled ?Self
Portrait?
portraying
a human frame naked,
arms outstretched
a bird suspended from
each palm
and in blank mid rib cage
a curious organ
otherwise unknown.?

-- *Daniel Berrigan*

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