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Sr. Anne Montgomery, Plowshares leader against nuclear weapons, dies

by Dennis Sadowski by Catholic News Service



Sr. Anne Montgomery, left, participated in six so-called Plowshares actions to protest nuclear weapons between 1980 and 2009. She is pictured with Sr. Megan Rice in a 2010 photo. (CNS/Ground Zero Center for Nonviolent Action)

WASHINGTON -- Nuclear weapons posed such a grave danger to all life on earth in the eyes of Sacred Heart Sr. Anne Montgomery that she devoted more than 30 years of years of her life to protest their stockpiling by the world's governments.

From participating in the first of the so-called Plowshares actions Sept. 9, 1980, until her sixth and last protest Nov. 1, 2009 -- for which she served two months in federal prison -- Montgomery epitomized the "heart and soul" of a movement that has spanned the globe, several friends and fellow activists for peace said.

Montgomery died of cancer Aug. 27 at Oakwood, the Society of the Sacred Heart's elder care center in Atherton, Calif. She was 85.

"Thomas Merton said it best that the highest obligation of Christian discipleship is the abolition of nuclear war taking the precedence over everything else. And she understood that," said John Schuchardt, who joined Montgomery as one of the Plowshares 8 in 1980 at the former General Electric nuclear weapons plant in King of Prussia, Pa., where they hammered on nuclear missile casings.

"I'll never forget Anne reading from the Book of Wisdom and the gentleness and the spirit of wisdom she read," Schuchardt said.

Oblate Fr. Carl Kabat, another Plowshares 8 participant, told Catholic News Service that Montgomery held firm to her beliefs about the danger of nuclear war and was prepared to face the consequences of her actions, even if it meant she was to be imprisoned.

"She was very strong," he said. "She was a very good person, very wonderful, (who was) motivated by faith."

In addition to Montgomery, Kabat and Schuchardt, the Plowshares 8 included Molly Rush; Jesuit Fr. Daniel Berrigan; his brother, Philip, a former Josephite priest; Elmer Maas; and Dean Hammer. The protest was the first of more than 75 in which participants around the world shared a desire to bring to life the biblical call to "beat swords into plowshares."

Montgomery's last Plowshares action -- the Disarm Now Plowshares -- took place on All Saints' Day in 2009 at the U.S. Navy's Strategic Weapons Facility, Pacific in Bangor, Wash., where more than 2,300 nuclear warheads are believed to be stored.

After being indicted at age 83 in September 2010 for the All Saints' Day protest, Montgomery told CNS she felt called to continue protesting nuclear weapons and would do so in one way or another until her last days.

"I have been involved since 1980 in Plowshares movements, which are really saying we as human beings, as Christians, as citizens of a country which is supposed to be governed by its citizens, we are responsible to eliminate these weapons," she said.

Jesuit Fr. Bill Bichsel joined the protest with Montgomery and said she was filled with courage in trying to make the world a better place for everyone, especially people living on the margins.

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"The constancy of what she was about was impressive," he told CNS. "It was not just about abolishing weapons. It was about trying to bring about a world that is compassionate."

Art Laffin, who was arrested with Montgomery in Plowshares actions twice, told *NCR* she offered "a great deal of courage and hope" to the U.S. church.

"She knew about the cross and what the cross meant. She lived in the hope of the resurrection. Hers was a living faith in the gospel of Jesus," he said.

Laffin said the sister will be remembered for her peace witness, for serving the poor and for going fearlessly into war zones to be with people under occupation.

"She was a doer of the Word," he said.

Montgomery was born Nov. 30, 1926, in San Diego to Rear Adm. Alfred E. and Alice Smith Montgomery. Her brother, Brook, preceded her in death.

The family moved several times during Montgomery's childhood before settling in Pennsylvania. She joined the Society of the Sacred Heart in Albany, N.Y., in 1948, professing final vows in 1956.

She taught at several Sacred Heart-run schools, including those in New York City and Albany, where she experienced the challenges faced by poor and minority people. In 1975, Montgomery completed training to work with children with learning disabilities and returned to New York to work with school dropouts in East Harlem.

The work led her to the Catholic Worker in New York and to the Little Sisters of the Assumption. By 1980, she moved into full-time ministry as a peace advocate, becoming known among faith-based activists on both the East and West coasts.

Montgomery later became involved with the Christian Peacemaker Teams, a nonviolent, ecumenical anti-war organization, serving as a witness for peace in Iraq, the Balkans and the West Bank.

One week before her death, Montgomery received the 2012 Courage of Conscience Award from the Peace Abbey in Sherborn, Mass., for her lifetime commitment to peacemaking.

A funeral Mass was scheduled for 10 a.m. Sept. 15 at Oakwood. Burial will be in Oakwood Cemetery.

[Patrick O'Neill contributed to this story.]

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