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Remembering the 20th anniversary of a Plowshares action for peace

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

On Dec. 7, 1993, my friends Philip Berrigan, Lynn Fredriksson, Bruce Friedrich and I walked onto the Seymour Johnson Air Force Base in Goldsboro, N.C., at 4 in the morning, passed through thousands of soldiers in the middle of full-scale national war games, came upon an F-15E nuclear capable fighter bomber and hammered upon it to fulfill Isaiah's Advent prophecy that someday, "they shall beat their swords into plowshares and study war no more."

The 20th anniversary of our Plowshares disarmament got me thinking and reflecting because we were charged with two felony convictions: destruction of government property and conspiracy to commit a felony crime. Each conviction carries the possibility of 10 years in prison. There have been nearly 100 plowshares disarmament actions since 1980, and hundreds of people have faced a variety of prison time. Several people did serve as long as 18 years in prison.

During those many long days and nights in North Carolina jails, I often pondered our eventual sentencing. What if the judge, a devout Catholic who hated us -- especially me, a newly ordained priest -- gave us the maximum, I used to ask myself, and I had to serve 20 years behind bars? What would it be like to be released in 2013? What would the world be like in 2013?

He surprised us by releasing Phil and me after nearly nine months in jail and sentenced me to nearly another year under house arrest, but Bruce and Lynn were sent on for another year in prison.

As we begin Advent, that wonderful season of hope, prayer, peace and preparation, I've been reflecting on that intense Advent 20 years ago. I described the entire episode in my published journal, *Peace Behind Bars*.

There's too much to take in, but here are some random memories. First, being with Phil, Bruce and Lynn, three of the greatest activists in the U.S. I have ever had the pleasure to know. Phil was a giant in the movement like his brother, my friend Dan, and he served many more years in prison for other actions before his death in 2002. Bruce became a leader at PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) and Lynn became a leader in the movement for independence of East Timor then in Amnesty International, working on behalf of the horn of Africa, among other extraordinary achievements. Their friendship throughout our action, trial and imprisonment is one of the greatest blessings of my life.

Then there was my Jesuit provincial. When I asked for "permission" under holy obedience to hammer on a nuclear weapon, he looked at me as if I was crazy and exploded. Eventually, he asked me, "Why would you do a fool thing like that?" I cut to the chase and said I didn't enter the Society of Jesus to sit around and drink or watch TV with other Jesuits but to follow Jesus, who was killed for doing civil disobedience in the temple. He sat back in his chair and said, "Oh, well, in that case ..."

Then he proceeded to say something extraordinary.

"I've been teaching in university for decades, and at the end of every school year, I gave the same homily: Life is short, and someday you will stand before Jesus in the glory of heaven. When he asks you what you did with the gift of life, what do you want to say to him? I see now that when you stand before Jesus, you want to say, 'I did what I could for disarmament, justice and peace, for your reign of peace on earth. I tried to follow you by working for nuclear disarmament.' So you have my blessing, and if they kill you, I will tell everyone what a great Jesuit you were." That was so helpful and affirming.

Six months later, in the midst of his terrible schedule, this great, unusual provincial who was so open to letting me follow Jesus in this "unusual" way drove six hours to the Edenton, N.C., jail for a 10-minute visit with me before a six-hour drive home. I appeared with two armed guards, looking like the Unabomber in my orange prison pajamas and scraggly beard, and spoke behind the glass booth into a microphone.

Fr. Provincial began by asking, "So, how's the food?" The interview was over as fast as it began, and as the armed guards started to lead me back to the cell, I asked, "Do you still support me?" He leaned forward, put his hands up as if he were framing a picture and said, "John, you're right where we want you!" We both laughed.

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I will never forget the action itself -- walking onto the base through some remote woods, across a field, and right through the soldiers and fighter bombers. Hammering twice on the side of the fighter bomber. Being arrested. Shutting down the national war games. Being forced to lie down on the grass with machine guns pointed at my head. Being surrounded by hundreds of soldiers and their furious commanders.

I spent that Advent in a cell with seven violent offenders, separated from my friends, at the Robeson County Jail, one of the worst in the country. I remember one prisoner stabbed another with a BIC pen

right at the cell door; blood was everywhere. I remember the gentle, older prisoner across the way who was on daily heart medicine and complained to the jailers about his poor treatment. They stopped giving him his medicine, and the next morning, he was found dead in his cell. Human rights groups, I subsequently learned, charged prison officials there with 25 mysterious deaths in the five years before we arrived.

Phil, Bruce and I were moved to a common cell at Christmas. We had no books and no possessions and there was nothing to do, so I asked Phil Berrigan to tell Bruce and me his life story. He talked for a week. Those stories became the basis for his autobiography, *Fighting the Lamb's War*, published the following year.

That January, we were moved in the middle of the night across the state to Edenton's small county jail. The warden worried for our safety, so he removed us from the main area and put us in a kind of solitary confinement: Phil and me in one tiny cell and Bruce next door in another cell, with our own little hallway and shower. Various other prisoners slept on the floors around us.

We woke at 6 a.m., read from the Gospel of Mark, did a three-hour bible study, then shared a Eucharist with Wonder bread and grape juice. "Prisoners' pot luck," as Daniel Berrigan named it in one poem. Later in the morning, we read our mail -- for Phil and me, up to 50 letters a day. Then, lunch and more intercessory prayer, followed by a one-hour timed writing practice. Following the techniques of Natalie Goldberg, we wrote the whole time, using 2-inch pencil stubs on blank sheets. We wrote many articles and letters during the course of our time. We then rested during the afternoon. Every evening after mealtime, Phil wrote his wife, Liz.

I remember waking up each morning with the shocking realization, "I'm in jail!" It seemed impossible that I would ever be released. Time came to a crashing halt. Every hour lasted a month. A thousand times, I wanted to ask the warden if I could just go out to the local coffee shop for half an hour then come back. Eventually, I did ask him, and he had a good laugh over that. It was so hard to come to grips with the realization that I couldn't leave the cell.

For me, the whole experience was like being locked in a tiny bathroom for eight months. The whole time, I kept thinking this could go on for five or 10 more years. Our trial was declared a mistrial, so we had to wait four more months for four separate trials. Finally, that summer, we were sentenced. My statement to the judge, posted on my website, remains the most important speech I've ever given. Of course, the judge was outraged by my earnest call for nuclear disarmament, but he unexpectedly released me soon afterward.

I will never forget a letter I received from Sr. Joan Chittister: "You are reminding us that the only way toward social change is through the Paschal Mystery of Jesus." That was such a helpful affirmation, too, one I've been pondering ever since. If we want to pursue justice, disarmament and peace as followers of Jesus, we have to take up the cross and risk persecution, trouble, prison, even death and then resurrection. That's the Christian way to peace. That's the daring challenge of active nonviolence in a world of total violence.

A few years later, I was directing the Sacred Heart Center, a community center for disenfranchised African-American women and children in Richmond, Va., and hanging out with a Jesuit friend.

"Why the heck did you do that Plowshares action?" he finally asked me.

"Well, I was really just trying to follow Jesus," I answered. "How do we follow someone who did civil disobedience in the temple and was subsequently arrested, tortured and executed? What does discipleship

to this revolutionary, nonviolent Jesus mean in a world of nuclear weapons and permanent war?"

For the first time, my friend understood. Of course, not everyone has to do a Plowshares action, but every Christian has to struggle with that call to discipleship.

Three friends are spending their Advent in prison right now for the most recent Plowshares action: Sr. Megan Rice, 82, of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, Greg Boertje-Obed and Michael Walli face 30 years in prison for entering the Y-12 National Security Complex in Oak Ridge, Tenn. Let's pray with them during these Advent days that Isaiah's oracle will be fulfilled and we will soon "beat swords into plowshares" and "study war no more."

[John Dear's new book, *The Nonviolent Life*, is available at paceebene.org and Amazon.com. To join his work with Campaign Nonviolence, contact the Franciscan-based peace group Pace e Bene. Next year, John will undertake a four-month-long national speaking tour about *The Nonviolent Life* and Campaign Nonviolence. *Lazarus, Come Forth!* and John's other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings*, *Put Down Your Sword* and *A Persistent Peace*, are available from Amazon.com. For more information, go to John's website.]

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