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Patrick O'Neill hammers a monument to nuclear war at Kings Bay Naval Submarine Base in April 2018. He was sentenced to 14 months in federal prison after being convicted of destruction of property on a naval installation, depredation of government property, trespass and conspiracy. (Courtesy of the Kings Bay Plowshares 7)



by Patrick O'Neill

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March 18, 2022

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When a first-class, stamped envelope from the Knights of Columbus arrived in my mailbox in January, I wondered what it could be. Other than the Knights' magazine, Columbia, sent to all members, I mostly only receive requests to buy insurance.

As I read the letter from North Carolina state deputy J.C. Reiher, I was shocked to realize I was being suspended from the Catholic men's fraternity. It was because I was [sentenced to federal prison](#) for participation four years ago in the Kings Bay Plowshares action at Naval Submarine Base Kings Bay, the East coast home port of the U.S. Trident submarine fleet, which includes enough nuclear firepower to end life as we know it on planet earth.

I was among a group of seven Catholic pacifists who used hammers, human blood and crime scene tape [to symbolically disarm](#) some statues of nuclear weapons at the base. The seven of us — Jesuit Fr. Stephen Kelly, Elizabeth McAlister, Martha Hennessy, Clare Grady, Carmen Trotta and Mark Colville — also served an indictment to the U.S. Navy for crimes against humanity and violations of international law.

When I moved from New York City to Greenville, North Carolina, in 1977 to be a pastoral assistant to Fr. Charles Mulholland at St. Gabriel Catholic parish in the Raleigh Diocese, I accepted an invitation from some of the guys in the parish to join the Knights. As a Knight I have enjoyed friendships with many of the men in my councils, and I have volunteered in many charitable functions.

The Knights sanctioned me for breaching human law, rather than embracing me for being obedient to God's law.

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In part, the letter I received from the North Carolina state deputy on Jan. 18 said: "It has come to my attention that on October 16, 2020 you were sentenced by U.S. District Court Judge Lisa Godbey Wood ... to fourteen months in federal prison ... and ordered to pay \$33,503.51 in restitution, as you and six other defendants, were found guilty in October 2019 on charges of Conspiracy, Destruction of Property on a Naval Installation, Depredation of Government Property, and Trespass."

"In light of the nature and the seriousness of the charge, and the fact that the United States Department of Justice had probable cause to arrest and convict you, I have concluded that the best course would be for you to separate from the Knights of Columbus," the letter continued.

"Accordingly, I hereby summarily suspend you," it said, adding that my conduct would qualify as "giving scandal; conduct unbecoming a member of this Order."

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A visitor to [the Knights website](#) is greeted with the words: "Be an everyday hero. Help us serve, protect and defend those in need."

I have been both a Catholic Worker and a Knight of Columbus for most of my adult life. I am a father of eight, and most my children have helped or participated in Knights activities. In my most recent activity as a Knight, I responded to my Grand Knight's request to represent my council at January's North Carolina March for Life in Raleigh, which I did with my wife and youngest daughter.

In addition to performing charitable works, the Knights encourage members to meet their responsibilities as Catholic citizens and to become active in the political life of their local communities, to vote and to speak out on the public issues of the day.

The Knights' 2016 policy statement "[Catholic Citizenship and Public Policy](#)" states that in the political realm, the Knights are committed to "opening our public policy efforts and deliberations to the life of Christ and the teachings of the Church."

"In accord with our Bishops, the Knights of Columbus has consistently maintained positions that take these concerns into account," it continues. "The order supports and promotes the social doctrine of the Church, including a robust vision of religious liberty that embraces religion's proper role in the private and public spheres."

I spent most of last year in Federal Correctional Institution Elkton in Ohio following my conviction. There, I used a lot of my time to befriend and minister to the other inmates as part of my desire to engage daily in the corporal Works of Mercy.

I have always held in high regard the charitable work that is a core value of the Knights. As a member of the Knights I have helped raise funds for "[Operation Lamb](#)," which makes grants to teachers who work with students with special needs. My own daughter, Mary Evelyn, has Down syndrome, and the Knights have always supported the Special Olympics and Special Education.

Another Knights' core value is patriotism, but it's a rather vague core value that recognizes the ethnic diversity of the United States, yet touts a traditional uncritical nationalism.

The Knights' website [states](#): "Members of the Knights of Columbus, be they Americans, Canadians, Mexicans, Cubans, Filipinos, Poles, or Dominicans, are patriotic citizens. We are proud of our devotion to God and country, and believe in standing up for both. Whether it's in public or private, the Knights remind the world that Catholics support their nations and are amongst the greatest citizens."

Considering the United States has invaded five of the nations mentioned above, which the Knights don't cite, the Order's brand of patriotism turns a blind eye to U.S. imperialism, expressing "that Catholics support their nations" — apparently right or wrong.

Rather than consider Jesus' injunction to "Love your enemies" and "Put away the sword," the Knights frequently celebrate patriotism by featuring [feel-good stories](#) about the U.S. military in its magazine.

The Knights also don't mention the Catholic peace movement as part of a "patriotic" option that is worthy of praise. I've seen no stories about Catholic Worker co-founder and candidate for canonization Dorothy Day in Columbia magazine.

I was grateful a few years back when my council invited my wife, Mary Rider, and me to give a presentation on the Catholic Worker. But another time I approached my council requesting that we "adopt" a Catholic man on North Carolina's death row, something that other parishes in the diocese have done, the idea went over like a lead balloon.

In North Carolina, we have executed 405 people at Raleigh's Central Prison since 1910. Of those state-sanctioned murders, 295 — 73% — have been imposed on African American men, according to [figures](#) from the Department of Public Safety. Lynching was essentially replaced by public hanging, the electric chair, gas chamber and now lethal injection.



Patrick O'Neill, second from right, stands outside the U.S. District Courthouse in Brunswick, Georgia, on Oct. 24, 2019, just after the trial on charges related to a 2018 protest against nuclear weapons. Also pictured are, from left, Martha Hennessy, Mark Colville, Clare Grady, Carmen Trotta, Patrick O'Neill and Liz McAlister. (Wikimedia Commons/Bones Donovan)

In response to the suspension letter, I told them that what saddened me most is that they never investigated my case beyond the news coverage.

"You did not speak to me or learn about my 44 years as a Catholic man of faith who has worked in the Diocese of Raleigh with the poor, the homeless, children, battered women, Latinos and so much more," I wrote.

"In addition, my legal case, based on the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, is still under appeal in the U.S. 11th Circuit Court of Appeals in Atlanta and the U.S.

Supreme Court," I said. "Since the court found that the seven of us met the criteria to apply the Religious Freedom Restoration Act to our case, any decision by the Knights should be put on hold while the appeals process proceeds."

If a Knight goes to war, leaving his family behind to kill or be killed in the name of God, he is honored for his service. If a Knight goes to prison, leaving his family behind to address the sinfulness of killing other children of God, he is scorned for his actions.

Is taking life in war "God's will"? Does Jesus, the Prince of Peace, want his children to drop bombs on each other? Is such a thing pleasing to God?

In my defense, Pope Francis has declared [the mere possession](#) of nuclear weapons to be sinful, and it was a nuclear weapons facility where we were arrested. While we were convicted on all counts, remarkably, and primarily because of the [testimony](#) of theologian Jeannine Hill-Fletcher of Fordham University and Bishop Joseph Kopacz of Jackson Mississippi, the court also concluded that the seven of us engaged in "symbolic, prophetic, and sacramental de-nuclearization" by our actions.

Rather than take note of this, the law and order-bound Knights opted to sever their ties with a Catholic pacifist. Like the court, which imprisoned me and protected Trident, the Knights sanctioned me for breaching human law, rather than embracing me for being obedient to God's law.

A second letter I received from the Knights on Jan. 19 stated: "During the period of your suspension and until such time as you may be reinstated, you may not: (1) present yourself as a member of the Knights of Columbus; (2) attend any Knights of Columbus business meeting, social event, or ceremonial; (3) participate as a member in any Knights of Columbus activity."

But I was also assured: "This does not affect any insurance policies you may have with the Knights of Columbus."

Editor's Note: NCR reached out to the Knights of Columbus' North Carolina State Council on March 10 to ask if they would like to offer further comment on their decision to suspend Patrick O'Neill's membership. At the time of publication of this article, we had not received a response.

A version of this story appeared in the **April 1-14, 2022** print issue under the headline: An anti-nuclear protest got me suspended from the Knights of Columbus.