NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

# Daniel Berrigan's 'Prayer for the Morning Headlines'

John Dear | Nov. 13, 2007 On the Road to Peace

**I** was in Los Angeles this past weekend to speak at the American Film Institute and saw the inspiring new documentary, "Pete Seeger: The Power of Song," about the legendary folk singer and social activist, now 88 years old. I've been privileged to know Pete for several years through his generous help with various demonstrations and projects. The film left me in awe of his lifelong fidelity to the struggle for justice and peace. He's never given up. To this day, he's still at it, just like my Jesuit brother, the legendary poet and anti-war activist, Daniel Berrigan, now age 86. That may be their greatest legacy: They never gave up. They stayed faithful to the journey to peace.

This week, Wipf and Stock publishers (**www.wipfandstock.com [1]**) published brand new editions of five classic works by Daniel Berrigan, beginning with a new edition of Dan's autobiography, *To Dwell in Peace,* featuring a new afterword by Dan and a new foreword by me. The other new editions are: *The Dark Night of Resistance,* a series of poetic meditations written while underground from the FBI in 1970; *No Bars to Manhood,* essays after the Catonsville Nine action and peacemaking; *Portraits of Those I Love,* reflections on friends such as Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day; and *The Discipline of the Mountain,* a profound study of Dante. As editor of this series of republished works, I wrote a short preface for the four new editions. Another five books will be published next year.

On top of this, Wipf and Stock also published this week a brand new book by Dan: *Exodus: Let My People Go,* a scripture study on the book of Exodus seen through the lens of nonviolent resistance and today's imperial oppression. This meditation features Dan's typical poetry and sharp insight, and a foreword by Ched Myers.

At the same time, another new collection of Dan's poetry has just been published, *Prayer for the Morning Headlines,* edited by Adrianna Amari with a foreword by Howard Zinn (Apprentice House, available from **www.amazon.com [2]**). Amari uses her photos of gravestones from various Baltimore cemeteries to set the stage for Dan's poems on life and death, hope and resurrection, war and peace. A very deep and moving collection.

Next spring, Eerdmans will publish, *The Kings and Their Gods: The Pathology of Power,* another ground-breaking scripture study by Dan, this time on the two books of Kings. "Let it be said plain," Dan writes. "The era of Kings is cursed of God -- of true God, I mean." These wretched kings "make of the deity a kind of glorified ventriloquist's dummy, placing in his mouth words by turns cunning, ferocious, calamitous, vengeful -- words that proceed from the darkness of their own hearts." Later on, he makes the connection: "The wars of the kings are our wars today. These awful days of the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Darfur."

"The Word of God is spoken for the sake of today, for ourselves," Dan concludes. "If not, it lies dead on the page. Lift the Word from the page, then -- take it to heart. Make of it the very beat of the heart. Then the Word comes alive -- it speaks to commonality and praxis. Do it -- do the Word."

*Publishers Weekly* magazine has already reviewed the forthcoming book, announcing that this is Berrigan in stunning form. "Here this modern-day prophet distills the wisdom of his life, his learning, and his remarkable experience. The book is that rare balance of polemics and poetry, of harshness and beauty, of despair and joy. It is truly a midrash for our troubled times -- both an indictment of the horror that is and an invitation to the great goodness that may be."

Last week, I spent a good day with Dan in New York City, having lunch at the local diner on West 100th Street, seeing a movie, enjoying dinner with our Jesuit community. I'm amazed at his steadfastness, his wisdom, his wit, his compassion, his commitment. His spirit is as strong as ever.

"I've been maintaining a new discipline," he told me last week. "First, I get as little of the bad news as possible. I only look at *The New York Times* once a week, if that, and occasionally watch the BBC. Second, I spend more time than ever with the good news, reading and meditating on the Gospel every morning, to be with Jesus."

Like Pete Seeger, Dan remains faithful to the struggle, faithful to the good news of peace, faithful as a witness, and still inspires many of us to keep on walking the road to peace, speaking out for peace, praying for peace, and living in peace. Dan continues to live in community, spends several hours a day studying and writing about the scriptures, meets with people and gives lectures and retreats regularly.

"We have assumed the name of peacemakers," he wrote long ago in *No Bars to Manhood*, "but we have been, by and large, unwilling to pay any significant price And because we want the peace with half a heart and half a life and will, the war, of course, continues, because the waging of war, by its nature, is total -- but the waging of peace, by our own cowardice, is partial. So a whole will and a whole heart and a whole national life bent toward war prevail over the velleities of peace?.There is no peace because the making of peace is at least as costly as the making of war -- at least as exigent, at least as disruptive, at least as liable to bring disgrace and prison and death in its wake."

"The only message I have to the world is: We are not allowed to kill innocent people." That's what he said on the witness stand during the 1981 trial of the Plowshares Eight. "We are not allowed to be complicit in murder. We are not allowed to be silent while preparations for mass murder proceed in our name, with our money, secretly?. It's terrible for me to live in a time where I have nothing to say to human beings except, 'Stop killing.' There are other beautiful things that I would love to be saying to people. There are other projects I could be very helpful at. And I can't do them. I cannot. Because everything is endangered. Everything is up for grabs. Ours is a kind of primitive situation, even though we would call ourselves sophisticated. Our plight is very primitive from a Christian point of view. We are back where we started. Thou shalt not kill; we are not allowed to kill. Everything today comes down to that -- everything."

In honor of Dan's new books, I offer here the title poem from the new collection, written more than 40 years ago

(with three new wars mentioned at the end). May it inspire us to be faithful to the journey, like Pete and Dan, to "seed hope" and "flower peace."

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**PRAYER FOR THE MORNING HEADLINES**
By Daniel Berrigan

MERCIFULLY GRANT PEACE IN OUR DAYS. THROUGH YOUR HELP MAY WE BE FREED FROM PRESENT DISTRESS. HAVE MERCY ON WOMEN AND CHILDREN, HOMELESS IN FOUL WEATHER, RANTING LIKE BEES AMONG GUTTED BARNS AND STILES. HAVE MERCY ON THOSE (LIKE US) CLINGING ONE TO ANOTHER UNDER FIRE. HAVE MERCY ON THE DEAD, BEFOULED, TRODDEN LIKE SNOW IN HEDGES AND THICKETS. HAVE MERCY, DEAD MAN, WHOSE GRANDIOSE GENTLE HOPE DIED ON THE WING, WHOSE BODY STOOD LIKE A TREE BETWEEN STRIKE AND FALL, STOOD LIKE A CRIPPLE ON HIS WOODEN CRUTCH. WE CRY: HALT! WE CRY: PASSWORD! DISHONORED HEART, REMEMBER AND REMIND, THE OPEN SESAME: FROM THERE TO HERE, FROM INNOCENCE TO US: HIROSHIMA DRESDEN GUERNICA SELMA SHARPEVILLE COVENTRY DACHAU VIETNAM AFGHANISTAN IRAQ. INTO OUR HISTORY, PASS! SEED HOPE. FLOWER PEACE.

John Dear's new book, *The Advent of the God of Peace*, with reflections on the daily readings for Advent and Christmas, is available at **www.paxchristiusa.org [3]**, and his new Doubleday book, *Transfiguration* is available at **www.amazon.com [2]**. The DVD about him, "The Narrow Path," is available from **www.sandamianofoundation.org [4]**. He is attending the annual protest at the School of the Americas, Fort Benning, Ga., this weekend. For further info, see: **www.johndear.org [5]**.

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