

Priest, keeper of the Word, risk-embracer

Colman McCarthy | Apr. 14, 2010



Jesuit Fr. Daniel Berrigan (CNS/Todd Plitt)

I wrote Daniel Berrigan's obituary the other day. The Jesuit priest, writer, teacher, dramatist, peacemaker, war resister and truth-teller who lives in New York City isn't dead, of course, nor is he even close to being ill as he nears his 89th birthday this spring. The obituary editor at *The Washington Post*, my old paper, said he wanted an expansive piece written unhurriedly beforehand rather than risk a quickie dashed off under deadline pressure. In the newspaper world, advance obituaries are usually reserved for the giants -- presidents and popes. Which explains why Berrigan gets one: He is a giant.

I had time to go back and reread much of the stunningly large amount of ambiguity-free prose that is the Berrigan opus, from the early books such as *Night Flight to Hanoi*, *No Bars to Manhood* and *False Gods, Real Men*, to the later ones: *Minor Prophets*, *Major Themes* and *To Dwell in Peace*, his autobiography. And more poems, essays, journals and plays, early and late.

The richness of it all would stand alone as enduring literature. Yet the beauty of the language -- flexuous metaphors, spare allusions -- goes beyond the pleasures of reading well-crafted prose. Underlying it is the Berrigan conscience that consistently takes brave stands and embraces risks.

The larger forms of this priest's defiance are well-known to anyone who has stayed even mildly abreast of the American peace movement in the past half-century. Tucked into the folds are the smaller but no less telling run-ins with power, starting with the presidents of Jesuit colleges and universities that sponsor ROTC programs. After teaching for a semester in 1989 at Loyola University in New Orleans, and taking his students on a field trip to learn how to get arrested at an antiwar rally, Berrigan wrote to the president that he wouldn't be back due to his opposition to Loyola's ROTC program. As recounted by Robert Ludwig in *Apostle of Peace*, the university president disagreed, replying that "given the reality of the military, it is better to have officers who have the benefit of a Jesuit education."

Berrigan wrote back: "I love your logic. It seems to me that, given the reality of abortion, Loyola should sponsor an institute for abortionists, and given the reality of capital punishment, you should sponsor an institute for executioners."

Equally searing was the Berrigan indictment of Jesuits as "masters of invention. They come out of the culture, they know how to take its pulse, try its winds and trim their sails. We're not running the Little Brothers of Jesus. We're not running the Catholic Worker. We're running Georgetown University, [its] School of Foreign Service. We're a nursery for the State Department."

He could have added the Pentagon, now that President Obama's chief national security advisor is retired Marine Gen. James L. Jones, a Georgetown graduate. As is Gen. George Casey Jr., chief of staff of the U.S. Army and a Georgetown ROTC graduate in May 1970. That same month Berrigan was underground, merrily on the lam evading an FBI manhunt after he refused to be imprisoned for his conviction of burning draft files in Catonsville, Md.

Presuming he read a recent issue of *NCR*, what must Daniel Berrigan have thought about a Georgetown Jesuit's column hailing the current Obama war policies as "very Catholic"? Probably with the same sadness and subdued anger brought on by reading in the same issue an article titled "Bishops back Obama Afghanistan strategy" (*NCR*, Jan. 8).

I first met Berrigan in 1966. He came to Washington at the invitation of Sargent Shriver, who was then heading the Office of Economic Opportunity. The summer before, Berrigan had served as a tutor in an Office of Economic Opportunity migrant worker program in Colorado. In effect, he was a federal worker. He spoke at a Shriver staff meeting, saying that the poor have it hard, and the hardest thing they have is us. He predicted, rightly, that the Vietnam War would drain money from the war on poverty, and that both wars would be lost.

I last saw Dan a few years ago when he officiated at the wedding of Arthur Laffin and Colleen McCarthy, two pacifists who help run the Dorothy Day Catholic Worker house in Washington. It was a festive event, with Dan at his priestly best and the wedding guests feeling blessed to enjoy the company of a rare keeper of the Word.

[Colman McCarthy teaches peace studies in several Washington schools.]

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