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

Quiet cancer of militarism on the US soul

NCR Editorial Staff | Dec. 8, 2010

Jesuit Fr. Dan Berrigan?s message to peacemakers, delivered Nov. 29 at Mount Manresa Jesuit Retreat House on Staten Island, N.Y., came down to this: Persevere.

?You have no right to tie yourself in knots because you want to know the outcome of what you are doing. Don?t, no, no. Let it go. Let it go into history. Let it go into Christ. Let it go into generations. Let it go into the children. Play it and pray it well,? *NCR* staff writer Joshua McElwee reported Berrigan saying. (You can see McElwee's story on Berrigan's talk here: Berrigan's message to peacemakers: Persevere [1].)

Yes, it can be discouraging, and the thought of giving up can be inviting. So it becomes important to ponder the words of a man who has taken the often lonely peace route for some six decades.

Some years back, Berrigan said: ?I protest because I cannot not protest.? In his eyes, not to protest, not to stand up against violence and militarism, meant relinquishing part of his humanity, an essential part of what it means to be a Christian.

Berrigan is but one of the peacemakers, albeit one of the most notable, who have dedicated their lives to working against militarism and violence. Many of the readers of this publication have worked, and continue to work, tirelessly on behalf of building a global community guided by peace and justice values.

Berrigan?s words come as encouraging reminders that we cannot give up, even when it appears so many of our efforts fall short.

How short?

To the degree federal spending is any indication of national values and priorities, we have lost our way. We are out of touch with our civic, human and Christian ideals.

Let?s take a look. The numbers today are so large they are incomprehensible. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute Military Expenditure Database, U.S. military spending in 2009 came to $663 billion. Second on the list of military spenders was China, at $98 billion. If one were to add all 2009 military spending by the top 19 spending nations, other than the United States, the figure comes to $642 billion, or $21 billion less than the United States spent in that year.

When the 2010 fiscal year budget was signed into law in October 2009, the final size of the Department of Defense?s budget was $680 billion, $16 billion more than President Obama had requested. An additional $37 billion supplemental bill to support the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan was expected to pass Congress in the spring of 2010, but has been delayed by the House of Representatives after passing the Senate. Meanwhile, military-related expenditures outside of the Department of Defense constitute between $319 billion and $654 billion in additional spending, bringing the total for military-related spending in the 2010 fiscal year to between $1.01 trillion and $1.35 trillion, a new landmark.

Meanwhile, the Obama administration last May released a one-page unclassified summary of a classified report sent to lawmakers. It projects that spending on so-called modernization of the U.S. nuclear weapons complex over the decade will reach $85 billion. An additional $100 billion is also to be spent on strategic nuclear delivery systems such as bombers and land- and submarine-based intercontinental ballistic missiles.

Elements in this spending orgy are being played out by pro-military-spending senators, many of them Catholics, as chips in a poker game with Obama, who wants the Senate to ratify a new START treaty. Continued nuclear reductions, however tediously slow, depend on Senate passage of this treaty with Russia.

Bishop Howard J. Hubbard of Albany, N.Y., speaking on behalf of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, in a Nov. 29 letter urged the Senate to approve the treaty during the lame-duck session in the final weeks of 2010.

Citing earlier statements by both Pope Benedict XVI and the bishops? conference, Hubbard called ratification of the arms control accord critical ?because it is a modest step toward a world with greater respect for human life.?

The treaty commits the two nations to reducing their strategic arsenals to 1,550 warheads deployed on long-range missiles, bombers and submarines. Under the previous START pact, which expired in December 2009, both countries reduced their strategic arsenals to 2,200 weapons each.

Our bishops are right to lobby for treaty ratification. We hope they press our Catholic senators, reminding them, as our bishops have taught for more than 20 years, that the U.S. nuclear deterrent system is only plausibly ?moral? as long as we are moving toward total nuclear disarmament.

Is there any way to comprehend what military spending is doing to us? How it is shaping our lives? Our souls? Can we ever fathom how a trillion dollars of military expenditures in a single year is viewed elsewhere in the world?

Beneath our daily commutes to work, our family life, our church life, beneath the civil laws that govern us, we have become a militarized nation. The influence of military spending silently shapes us as it shapes our national budget.

Dwight Eisenhower?s presidency is probably remembered less for what he did in office than for what he said while heading for the exit. In a nationally televised address Jan. 17, 1961, only four days before John F. Kennedy?s inaugural, Eisenhower warned of the dangers of ?undue influence? exerted by the ?military-industrial complex.? He cautioned that maintaining a large, permanent military establishment was new in the American experience, and suggested that an ?engaged citizenry? offered the only effective defense against the ?misplaced power? of the military-industrial lobby.

He warned: ?The total influence -- economic, political, even spiritual -- is felt in every city, every statehouse, every office of the federal government. We recognize the imperative need for this development. Yet we must not fail to comprehend its grave implications. Our toil, resources and livelihood are all involved; so is the very structure of our society.?

This was not Dan Berrigan speaking. This was a U.S. president and former U.S. general.

When the Cold War ended in 1989, America might have been expected to retool its war economy, but we did not. Two decades later, U.S. militarism has become a cancer in our body politic. Through campaign contributions, defense contractors control the politicians who vote on military appropriations bills. For years, bills get passed in Congress not because they respond to real needs of national security but because they feed the various addictions of generals, admirals, weapons makers and politicians. Our political system spawns military

spending even as it sucks the life out of our schools, medical systems, infrastructure, libraries and arts.

What is the answer? We?ve heard it if we care to listen. Persevere. Do not give up. Lobby, protest, resist.

And thank you, Dan Berrigan, for your encouragement to keep the faith.

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