

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

December 8, 2010 at 11:51am

Phil Berrigan's Advent vision

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

Every December 6th, my friends and I take time to remember Philip Berrigan, the legendary anti-nuclear activist who died eight years ago. This week five friends are taking Phil's advent vision of peace into court as they stand trial in Tacoma, Wash. for last year's Plowshares disarmament action at the Trident Nuclear Submarine base in Bangor.

The members of the "Disarm Now Plowshares" group -- Jesuit Fr. Bill Bichsel, Susan Crane, Lynne Greenwald, Jesuit Fr. Steve Kelly, and Society of the Sacred Heart Sr. Anne Montgomery -- all face charges of "Conspiracy, Trespass, Destruction of Property on a Naval Installation and Depredation of Government Property" and the possibility of many years in prison.

"On Nov. 2, 2009, we remembered the words of the prophet Isaiah, who had a vision of beating swords into plowshares, converting weapons of war into something useful for human life," co-defendant Susan Crane said in a Dec. 2 pre-trial hearing at Tacoma Union Station Courthouse.

"It is our firm understanding that these Trident nuclear weapons are illegal under national and international law, as well as the teachings of our faith, and general humanitarian law and conscience."

The Trident submarine base at Bangor, just 20 miles west of Seattle, is home to the largest single stockpile of nuclear warheads in the U.S. arsenal, housing more than 2,300 nuclear warheads. The government will probably not allow the defendants to offer a "necessity defense" -- or even discuss the illegality and insanity of nuclear weapons -- so we expect our friends to be sent off to prison.

I'm sure the government and the military understand these actions all too well and fear the power of the peace movement in general. They vehemently suppress every outbreak of truth and discourage everyone from working for disarmament. In order to maintain the unjust status quo they have to.

The government's secret concerns came to light this weekend in documents leaked by WikiLeaks.

Part of the latest round of documents released by the international organization was a lengthy cable from the U.S. Ambassador to Ireland expressing his worries over the acquittal of five Plowshares activists in Ireland a few years ago.

The activists had hammered on a U.S. fighter bomber bound for Iraq while it was refueling at Shannon Airport in Ireland.

The U.S. official feared that their acquittal might strengthen the peace movement and hurt the government's war effort. As Howard Zinn taught, U.S. administrations secretly tremble before grassroots movements which refuse to disappear.

Phil Berrigan would rejoice that good people continue to stand up for nuclear disarmament and pay the price. As a member of the first Plowshares group and five more afterwards, Phil spent over eleven years of his life in prison. For those of us who knew him, Phil was another John the Baptist -- a one man truth force, a source of grave concern to governments and empires.

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As we read in this week's Advent readings, John the Baptist "prepared the way" for the Christ and his reign of peace. Phil did his best to carry on that mission. He too prepared the way -- by heralding a new world without nuclear weapons or war.

"The disarmament of our nuclear weapons needs to be a priority for us," Phil told me when I formally interviewed him in 1992. "Peacemaking needs to be our priority. Peacemaking is not only a central characteristic of the Gospel; it is the greatest need of the world today.

"We all have to take responsibility for the Bomb," he continued. "The fact that we are complicit in the presence of the Bomb, because we help pay for it and allow its deployment and possible use -- and we have threatened to use it at least 25 times unilaterally during the 47 years of the Cold War -- destroys us spiritually, morally, psychologically, emotionally and humanly, in a broad general sense."

"We have to continue resisting war and nuclear weapons as long as we live," Phil said.

"The U.S. is claiming to be the only superpower in the world and you can't maintain a superpower status unless you are armed to the teeth. So the U.S. will continue with weapons development, Star Wars, and a permanent war economy -- because to do otherwise is to change the status quo and redistribute the wealth. The last people who want to do that are the one/two-hundredth who control thirty-seven percent of what the country produces. We need to keep resisting this business of making war."

The trial of the "Disarm Now Plowshares" group in Tacoma began on the 17th anniversary of my own Plowshares disarmament action.

At 4 a.m., Dec. 7, 1993, Lynn Fredriksson, Bruce Friedrich, Phil Berrigan and I walked onto the Seymour Johnson Air Force Base near Goldsboro, N.C., right through national war games, and hammered on a nuclear-capable F-15 Eagle fighter jet to fulfill Isaiah's vision.

I spent eight months in a tiny cell with Phil before I was released.

Those were certainly the most painful -- and most blessed -- months of my life. We never left our cell, never went outdoors, and rarely saw anyone. We created a monastic routine -- up at 6 a.m. for a three hour bible study, followed by reading the mail, lunch, writing articles, nap time, reading, dinner, and letter writing.

I especially remember Christmas week 1993. During the first two months of our imprisonment we weren't allowed any books, not even a Bible, so we just sat and talked for days on end.

One day, I asked Phil to tell us the story of his life. He talked for four days.

Bruce and I literally sat at his feet as he told story after story -- from his childhood as the youngest of six boys; his experience as a soldier in World War II; his years at the College of the Holy Cross; his entrance into the Josephites; his service as a priest in New Orleans, Newburgh, and Baltimore; his failed attempt to join the Freedom Riders; and his friendships with his brother Dan, Thomas Merton, and others.

Phil told us the details of his part in the Baltimore Four -- how in October, 1967, he was arrested for pouring blood on draft records with three others at the U.S. Custom House.

Phil also told us of his part in the Catonsville Nine -- how in May, 1968, along with his brother Daniel and seven others, he entered the U.S. recruiting center in Catonsville, Maryland, took out draft records, walked to the parking lot, poured homemade napalm on them, and burned them; and how he survived those initial years in prison.

I remember my amazement as he spoke of landing, ironically, in the same cell group with Jimmy Hoffa, who threatened the others if any harm came to Fr. Phil.

We also discussed the Harrisburg conspiracy charges, when Phil and six others went on trial in Harrisburg, Penn. in 1972 over conspiracy charges which claimed they were going to kidnap then-National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger and bomb heating tunnels.

Phil discussed the long trial and eventual acquittal, one of the first in an anti-war case.

When Phil first heard that he was now facing a penalty of life in prison for the (false) charges, he told us he was devastated. But after a few hours, he said he made peace with that prospect and regained his composure.

Phil spoke of founding the Jonah House resistance community in Baltimore after he married Elizabeth McAlister and his work for decades -- along with their great children Frida, Jerry and Kate and their friends -- resisting war, organizing civil disobedience actions, serving the local poor, and speaking out for disarmament. Later, Phil wrote his autobiography, *Fighting the Lamb's War* -- a book well worth reading.

Those were exhilarating hours. Bruce and I almost forgot we were in prison. We felt energized, as if we were listening to John the Baptist share his personal story. Phil told us his journey to peace and encouraged us to stay faithful to our own journeys.

Phil was arrested again Dec. 19, 2000. He was part of Plowshares vs. Depleted Uranium, a group of activists who hammered and poured blood on two A-10 Warthog aircraft at a National Guard base in Middle River, Maryland.

When Phil was released from prison in early 2002 he limped from pain in his hip. That spring, he had a hip replacement. It never quite healed. Then, in October, we learned he had cancer.

During his last week with us, thirty relatives and friends kept vigil near his bedside at Jonah House. That week was one of the most moving and powerful experiences of our lives. In the midst of our grief, the spirit of faith, hope and love that grew around Phil was the strongest I have ever experienced. Until the end, Phil was teaching us how to make peace.

"We have to have peace," he said. "And we don't have much of it yet. We don't have a peaceful relationship with the environment or with one another or with other nations and that means that we are really at war with God. If we can't handle the exquisite creation that God has entrusted to us in stewardship, if we can't have a peaceful and just relationship with creation and with one another, how can we have a solid relationship with God?"

As our friends stand trial in Tacoma and the rest of us keep vigil this Advent, the voice of Philip Berrigan still cries out in the American wilderness, urging us to do what we can to abolish war and nuclear weapons.

Pray, organize, speak out, take nonviolent risks, and stay faithful to the peacemaking Christ and his reign of peace, he would say.

With the shining example of Philip Berrigan who lives on in our hearts, we too can proclaim the Advent vision of John the Baptist.

"Repent America!" we say. "Disarm now, for God's reign of peace and nonviolence is at hand!"

Advent is a good time to recommit ourselves to that message, journey, and vision of peace.

For further information, see: www.disarmnowplowshares.wordpress.com and www.jonahhouse.org. John's collection of the writings of Nobel Laureate Mairead Maguire, *The Vision of Peace*, has just been republished by www.wipfandstock.com. His new book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings (Orbis)*, and other recent books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down Your Sword*, as well as Patricia Normile's *John Dear On Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com. To contribute to Catholic Relief Services' "Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund," go to: <http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn>. For further information, or to schedule a lecture or retreat, visit: www.johndear.org.

Source URL (retrieved on 08/23/2017 - 10:49): <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/road-peace/phil-berrigan-s-advent-vision>
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