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

Fr. Bill Bichsel's ordeal: Cruel and inhuman punishment

John Dear | Jun. 1, 2011 On the Road to Peace

Last week's Supreme Court ruling against California's prison system as "cruel and inhuman punishment" was not a surprise -- except in the sense that it was said publicly. Many of us who have experienced our criminal injustice system first hand know well how horrific it is. The court ruled that 35,000 California prisoners would have to be transferred or released because the system is so unjust.

The case sparked new discussion on overcrowded prisons (156,000 prisoners suffer in California prisons built for half that number), but it started years ago because of the atrocious lack of health care in California's prisons. Many prisoners died needlessly over the years, usually because they were not given their medicine.

It's not surprising either that our violent, imperial nation has the highest documented incarceration rate in the world. The most recent figure says we have over 2,292,000 people in prison. The so-called "war on drugs" and mandatory sentencing laws against nonviolent offenders are partly to blame for this huge prison population.

Prison is bad for one's health, to put it mildly. During my last stint in the Las Vegas Jail for the Creech 14 action, I was stunned as the woman in charge of the main admitting area where a hundred of us sat in chains or handcuffs, yelled at us and threatened us. Then, she ordered an officer to beat up one prisoner, and he threw him against the wall. Nobody blinked.

Certainly one of the worst places I've ever been is the Robeson County Jail in North Carolina near the South Carolina border. Built for 75 people, it held 400 people when I was there for a few weeks in 1993 for our Plowshares action. One human rights report claimed that over 25 people had died in the five years previous to my stay. Most of them had been denied medicine, and were simply found dead the next morning.

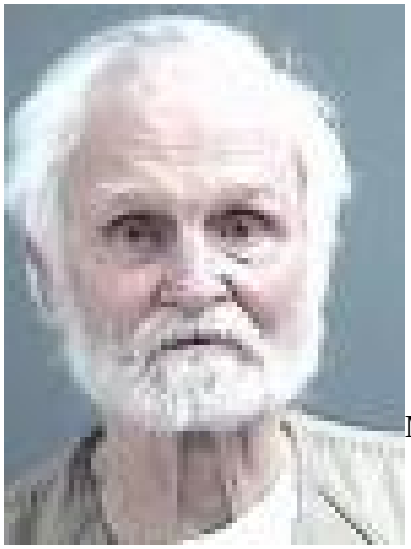
I remember an elderly man serving a year for a nonviolent offense that Philip Berrigan and I had befriended. He was in the cell across the hall from us. We occasionally talked. He told us of his heart condition. We saw pills delivered to him every day. About a month after our transfer to another jail, we received word that he had died. He had argued with a jailer, so the jailer did not give him his medicine, and he died that night.

This week, many of us will gather in San Francisco to celebrate the release of Franciscan Fr. Louie Vitale after his six months in prison for protesting the "School of Americas," our U.S. assassination and terrorism school at Fort Benning, Ga. Louie's in fine fettle, as determined as ever to do what he can to resist our wars and weapons. We go to honor his indomitable spirit (See: www.paceebene.org).

Last week the Nuclear Resister (www.nuclearresister.org) reported that since Obama's inauguration, over 2,600 people have been arrested for similar acts of nonviolent civil disobedience against war and injustice, a stunning number given the total lack of media coverage on peace and justice movements. As our prisons continue to worsen, it's amazing that activists are willing to risk imprisonment for social change.

At the moment, some friends are currently languishing in Tennessee and Georgia jails for civil disobedience at the Y-12 nuclear complex at Oak Ridge, Tenn. (See: www.jonahhouse.org). This past weekend, one friend

suffered severe chest pains and was refused medical help. We are hoping and praying for her healing, and mobilizing folks to work on her behalf.



Many of us are especially concerned about Fr. Bill Bichsel. "Bix," as he is known, is an 83-year old Jesuit from the Tacoma Catholic Worker doing time for a plowshares disarmament action. He could be released at the end of June, but will then be sentenced for his part in last year's Oak Ridge protest (and probably get another 6-12 months). Two years ago, Bix's doctor gave him six months to live. He needs to take nitro glycerine every day for his heart condition. Bix had visited Hiroshima in 2009, and was so moved that he decided to undertake civil disobedience for nuclear disarmament, even at the risk of his life. Many of us are praying with him on his paschal journey for peace.

Since he went into prison on March 28, Bix has traveled the nation. He started in the SeaTac Federal Detention Center in Seattle, Wash.; then after a few weeks, without notice, he was shipped across the country in a two week trip that nearly killed him. They flew him in chains to Las Vegas, then bused him to Pahrump, Nevada, and then flew him to Oklahoma City. From there, he was flown to the infamous Atlanta Federal Penitentiary -- a notorious transfer center where cruel and inhuman punishment is the norm. Then, he was shipped to Knoxville County Jail and landed at the Knox County Sheriff's Detention Facility where he now sits.

On April 14, Bix wrote from Seattle about his initial weeks in prison:

> I shuffle around the common area, and I thank God for being here and for the peace I experience. I am not anxious or overly concerned about anything? [I have] things wrong from head to toe, move slowly, tire easily, and take a half ton of pills to prolong breath and life [but] I'm blessed by the peace and quiet spirit inside. I'm not concerned about trying to be more than I am with the other inmates. I'm trying to let them see -- and not hide or disguise -- my lack of knowledge on so many things? I'm lucky to be here.
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> I know I'm getting weaker -- it takes all my strength and breath to make my bunk. I have to sit down a few times in the process. It takes all I have now to do one or two slow shuffles around the common area. I don't feel panicked or upset about my condition. I know I can keel over at any time, but I feel very much at peace with this condition and understand and accept it -- thankfully -- as part of my journey.
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> I don't have a regular prayer time now -- but I pray and try to be alert, i.e., at rest in the presence of God. I ask God to lead me as God sees fit. There is no anxiousness or compulsiveness or resolve to preach or hold prayer sessions or do any "religious actions" -- just be and shuffle around. There are four TVs which I avoid, with their steady diet of sex and violence. I am so thankful to feel at peace with my life. It's a gift from God and I do feel God working in and with me. I could be wrong, but this is what I experience.

After Bix landed in Knoxville, his primary support person and old friend Joe Power-Drutis flew there to be near him. Joe writes regular updates about Bix and the others (see: www.disarmnowplowshares.org). On May 7th, he wrote of his visit with Bix:

> I am not sure what I expected to encounter but what I did see was a broken and very hurting soul. Pale, frail, mildly shaky, complaining of being unable to hear because of fluid in his ears, dizziness and lightheadedness, pointing with his fingers that he is struggling to push the right numbers on the phone -- eyes glassed over, flat affect, and complaining that his gait is so poor, yet he has been commanded to "keep moving." He requested a wheelchair and was refused. He went on to tell me with tears in his eyes that he was placed in a cell and locked in there, with woefully inadequate bedding and clothing, for a week. He repeatedly asked guards for clothing and an extra blanket, and was laughed at and ignored. At some point after repeated requests, another inmate gave up his blanket to Bix.
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> Bix's medical problems create a lack of blood and oxygen to his hands and feet, leaving them white and ice cold when his overall body temperature falls. Following this, his hands and feet are filled with pain, like being jabbed repeatedly with needles. He spoke of the never-ending pain, which leads to sleep deprivation, insomnia, disassociation and hallucinations.
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> Bix was certainly aware of what he was doing when he walked onto the base at Bangor and across the blue line at Y-12. For these acts he is ready to remain in prison and pay the ultimate price. But this in no way permits this system of criminal injustice to do what it has done to him. The unjust and unlawful acts perpetrated on him are tantamount to torture.

Yesterday, Joe told me that Bix is better. I asked Joe to ask Bix for a message, and Joe sent this on. As you see, Bix remains strong in spirit. Despite the cruel and inhuman punishment which is our evil prison system, Bix has kept his focus on Jesus and the kingdom of God. His heart is in the right place.

> We Americans are lulled and brainwashed. We accept the security of nuclear weapons as our guardians. As a result, we live a type of Midas Touch, embracing gold and all that shines while we decay within from greed, addiction, and selfishness. Beyond this, we arm ourselves more and more for the destruction of others.
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> Jesus comes to us in the midst of this, and no matter how high the waves of empire might be, that threaten to swamp us, he invites us to walk the path he walks and to believe his Kingdom is real.
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> Jesus doesn't give up on us. He tells us, "Do not be afraid." He invites us to follow him and walk through the violence, to walk in resistance to the Powers that bring death. He invites us to a life of real community where we care for each other as brothers and sisters. No matter how small the seed of our efforts, the Powers fear most our attempts to come together and live as God intended us to live.
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> We as a people must come together and meet one another and invite the Spirit to come into our midst. "Where two or more are gathered," the Spirit will be. We must trust this and follow the call of our hearts. We are called to say "yes" to God's invitation and to be a part of God's Kingdom as it unfolds in our lives.

May we remember our imprisoned resisters and join their efforts for peace and justice, for a world without cruel and inhuman punishment.

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[Editor's Note: John Dear's column will start a new summer schedule and be posted every other week through early August.]

John Dear will speak next week, June 9-10, at the Transformations Spirituality Center in Kalamazoo, Mich.; on June 23-24, at the Wildgoose Festival in Durham, NC (www.wildgoosefestival.org); and July 1-2, at Loyola University in Chicago for a workshop on Jesus? teachings on peace, hope and love. John?s latest 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. John is featured in the DVD film The Narrow Path, available at www.sandamianofoundation.org. 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 03/12/2014 - 06:06): http://ncronline.org/blogs/road-peace/fr-bill-bichsels-ordeal-cruel-and-inhuman-punishment

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