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

Sister, just freed from custody, speaks with civil disobedience

Joshua J. McElwee | Sep. 21, 2011

Sr. Mary Dennis Lentsch wears an outfit of flowers as part of a vigil outside the Y-12 Nuclear Weapons Complex near Oak Ridge, Tenn., in April. (NCR photos/Joshua J. McElwee)

Sr. Mary Dennis Lentsch?s voice is soft, with a little bit of a nasal tone. To hear her, you have to learn forward in your chair, and turn your ear in her direction.

Yet, Lentsch, a member of the Presentation Sisters of Dubuque, has for many years spoken loudly against nuclear weapons. Set to be freed from custody after three months in prison today for an act of civil disobedience, she has spent much of the past 22 years opposing the Y-12 Nuclear Weapons Complex near Oak Ridge, Tenn.

When the federal government started to put together plans for a new $7.5 billion nuclear weapons manufacturing facility at the site, Lentsch joined 12 others in July, 2010, to witness opposition for the plans. Climbing over a barbed-wire fence onto the property of the current facility, they were immediately arrested and found guilty of trespass in federal court this May.

In a series of hearings over the last week and a half, eleven of the activists found guilty for the 2010 action have been facing their sentences. While Lentsch was sentenced to time served, others have received harsher punishments. Bonnie Urfer, the co-director of the watchdog group Nukewatch, received an additional four months in prison, and Steve Baggarly, a member of the Los Angeles Catholic Worker community, received another eight months.

Lentsch, an educator for 30 years in Iowa and Minnesota, says she moved to Tennessee in 1989 because she was interested in ministering to the needs of those living in Appalachia where the percentage of people who are Catholic is the lowest in the country at under two percent, and poverty is still the norm for many living away from cities and towns.

In a spring interview, Lentsch said that ministry quickly forced her to look at the ?deep connections? between poverty and military spending, and that she wanted to ?raise her voice? against the spending, which, she says, is

?holding basic human needs hostage.?

Amidst planning sessions for an April 18 vigil at the Y-12 site, Lentsch also spoke of the ?deep mystery? of civil disobedience, and how she views the effectiveness of her actions against nuclear weapons. Following is that interview, which has been edited for length and clarity.

***NCR*:Can you tell me more about your actions at the Y-12 site? What kinds of things have you done in the past to raise your voice?**

Lentsch: Well, I have made what I call a ?peace presence? at the gates of Y-12 a few times.

That means I stay there 24 hours a day for a week, for seven days. It?s almost like a retreat. I bring a port-a-pot, and borrow somebody?s truck and sleep in the back of the truck. And then just be present there for 24 hours.

What?s the purpose of that presence? What effect do you think it has on the people who work at the site?

Let me tell you some stories. One time when I was there, a big storm came up. So after the storm, maybe about 8:15 that evening, a man came down in a security truck. I went over to meet him and he asked, ?Are you okay?? He said, ?I?m Dan, the maintenance man, and I?ve come down to see if you?re okay.?

I said, ?Yeah, I?m fine.?

Another time, during a day presence, there had also been a storm. So afterwards, I took my folding chair, and my bible, and just was present there and went for a walk. And two maintenance men were fixing something nearby. So one of them came over and said, ?We really admire what you?re doing.? And I said, ?Thank you. It?s important. But you probably are contributing to peace too.?

Then I said, ?Look over the fence there.? And here was a tree that was blooming. It was just beautiful, a pink dogwood.

And I said, ?Isn?t that tree beautiful?? And for some reason he then told me that he writes poetry.

So I asked if he could me read me one of his poems, but he said he didn?t have his notebook with him. But just that little give and take of the concern meant something. It just shows, through all the misunderstandings, they are concerned about us. Even the police here, I have found them to be very professional and even kind.

I just think there?s so much mystery in the witness of civil resistance. Eight years ago, when I did the action at Y-12 and I was serving time in Lexington, a woman wrote to me. She said, ?When you crossed that barrier, I just started crying and crying because I was pregnant. And I thought, that?s what is happening for my child.?

The witness value is mysterious because it?s God?s action. In prison, I heard from people all around the world that I don?t know. Just the mystery of how this happens and how it affects people is incredible.

You talk of a ?mystery? of civil resistance. But how do you measure success in your action? How do you think of the balance of success and faithfulness? What effect do you think you are really having?

I feel that when I?m called to act, it?s a mysterious inner call. It?s a call of conscience for me. I don?t believe that I will shut the bomb plant down. I just don?t believe that. But there?s no way to measure the success when we follow our conscience.

What we?re facing is an evil. And the exorbitant money that?s being spent is holding basic human needs hostage. We don?t have quality education, or decent affordable housing, or developmental child care, or money for alternative energy, or so many other things because of the amount of money that?s being spent.

You can?t measure the effect of this. I think I heard once that behind every avalanche is a snowflake, behind every rockslide is a pebble. So, in this movement for a nuclear free future, it?s each individual coming together, and eventually that will happen.

For me, the success and the faithfulness are so intertwined. It?s just like when we go to these trials, they are important educational opportunities. When we were in the jail cell before we were arraigned, several of the arrested women were saying that they were going to defend themselves.

I said, ?Well I?m going to have a lawyer because I think we need to educate our lawyers and the judge.?

Well we have 12 lawyers now because everyone got a lawyer except one. That means there are 12 lawyers now talking to each other. They?re all planning strategies. They?re learning about nuclear weapons and international law. I think this whole educational perspective is powerful.

The last time we had four lawyers. This time there?s 12. It?s an opportunity for them to come together and learn about this.

Can you talk to me about living in jail? How do you face that? What is it like to you?

When I did the action, I knew that that?s what might happen. I knew that I would face that and I would lose all control of the legal process. I?m not afraid. I?m not afraid because in all of this, and especially in prison, I have really felt the embrace of a good and gracious, and loving, God.

?Be not afraid, I am with you always.? That is so powerful to me. And when you think of a year, that is not very much time. Think of people who have cancer or terminal illness. They don?t know how long it will be. I know that whatever my sentence, there will be an end to it. And people with illnesses, or those who realize they have addictions, can?t see an end. I know there is an end to it.

And prison is not easy, but I believe we get the grace to live there, to live in a generous, joyful way. I have

family that love me, I have community that love and support me. Many of the women in prison can?t say that. I know when I come back out I?ll be received as part of a religious community. And women coming out don?t have a place to go. They don?t know where to go for a job; many are estranged from their family. So I?m blessed in so many ways.

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