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At Offutt, activists call for nuclear weapons cuts

Joshua J. McElwee | Oct. 5, 2011

Franciscan Sr. Pat Farrell leads a group of Catholics with a drum during a vigil outside Offutt Air Force Base near Omaha, Neb., Oct 2. (Photos courtesy of the Dubuque, Iowa, Sisters of St. Francis)

In this time of economic hardship, with unemployment near historic highs and with budgets stretched tight at all levels from the federal government down to the local school boards, it is not right to be spending billions of dollars on nuclear weapons.

That was the message some 150 Catholic activists carried Oct. 2 to the gates of Offutt Air Force Base, near Omaha, Neb., home of U.S. Strategic Command, which is responsible for the planning and targeting of the nation?s nuclear weapons.

Three of the activists, including a Franciscan sister and a member of the Des Moines, Iowa, Catholic Worker community, were arrested after crossing onto the property of the base in a symbolic act of civil resistance.

The event was sponsored by the Dubuque, Iowa, Sisters of St. Francis.

The timing, said Sr. Pat Farrell, vice-president of the Dubuque Franciscan community and president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, ?expressed our own commitment to peacemaking as Franciscans.?

In a press release, the Dubuque community said it planned the date of the event partly to commemorate the 25th anniversary of Pope John Paul II?s Oct. 4, 1986, Interreligious Prayer for Peace Gathering in Assisi, Italy, and the annual Oct. 4 feast day of St. Francis of Assisi.

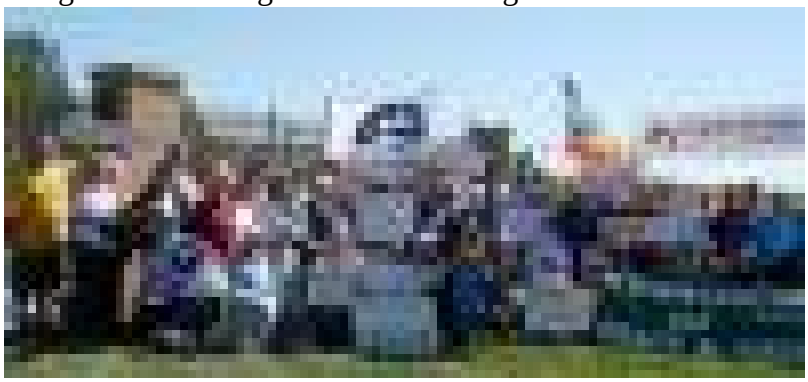
But, for Franciscan Sr. Marian Klostermann, one of the three who was arrested for stepping onto the base, one of the primary reasons for the action was to focus on nuclear weapons spending.

With the economic downturn affecting families across the country, she and the other activist said, it should affect nuclear weapons spending too.

The action, which Klostermann said in a phone interview saw activists from ?at least ten? cities converge on the base, was meant to signal that President Obama?s dedication of $80 billion towards the U.S. nuclear weapons

complex over the next 20 years is ?totally unjust.?

?We?ve tried everything and our representatives do not hear,? said Klostermann. ?They continue to fund these weapons, even when so many social programs are being cut?.It is totally unjust. Since they don?t hear us, we are using our bodies to give another message because the words don?t seem to be convincing anyone.?



Farrell was also present the action. In a phone interview she said that the activists prayed together for about an hour before the three crossed onto the base.

Several speakers also addressed the crowd, including Martha Hennessy, a granddaughter of Dorothy Day, who cofounded the Catholic Worker with Peter Maurin in 1933.

After the prayers and speeches, Klostermann said, the three who crossed the line received a blessing from the crowd, sang together a rendition of the traditional hymn ?Peace is flowing like a river,? and then walked onto the paved walkway leading to the base and were immediately taken into custody.

Just before their arrests, Klostermann said, Hennessy placed blue scarves among the three line-crossers necks. Brought home by the Catholic Worker legacy-holder from a recent trip to Afghanistan, they represented hopes for peace from around the world.

The two others who walked onto the property were Gilbert Landolt, a member of Veterans for Peace and a member of the Des Moines Catholic Worker community, and Marilyn Riley, a retired school principal.

Farrell said the peace action also re-emphasized the mission and vision of vowed religious.

?We?re to be a prophetic in the church and the world,? said Farrell. ?That?s an identity that, over the years, has only become clearer to us. And to be a prophetic presence from a place of deep prayerfulness is a strength that we?re discovering more and more.?

Klostermann, who has been with the Franciscan order for 58 years, said the three line-crossers were briefly held after their arrests to be processed and then released, and each expect to receive separate notices of court dates in coming weeks. They each face up to six months in prison for federal trespass.

Sunday?s action at the base is the latest in a years-long campaign to draw attention to the U.S. Strategic Command, also known as STRATCOM. Four others walked onto the property in an act of civil resistance in August, 2010.

One of the four, Omaha, Neb., Catholic Mark Kenney, is serving a six-month sentence for that action [1], and is expected to be released this month.

As for Farrell, she said actions like these reflect the identity of women religious around the U.S.

?We?ve been learning that prophetic contemplation and prophetic prophecy are ways of expressing our identity

in ways that are becoming more clear to us.?

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