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Activists express concern for imprisoned priest

Joshua J. McElwee | Jan. 23, 2012

Activists and friends of an 83-year-old Catholic priest imprisoned for an act of civil resistance are expressing some relief after prison officials responded to concerns he was facing unfair treatment in prison. The priest has not eaten since Jan. 10 to protest his placement in solitary confinement.

Jesuit Fr. Bill Bichsel was serving a three-month prison term in the Federal Detention Center near Seattle, Wash., for a July 2010 action at the Y-12 National Security Complex in Oak Ridge, Tenn., where a new nuclear weapons manufacturing facility is being planned.

Bichsel was moved Jan. 10 to a prison transition facility in Tacoma, Wash. He was sent back to the federal detention center in Seattle the next day because authorities said he had received an unauthorized visit at the transition facility.

Fellow activists say Bichsel has begun a fast since his return to prison, where he is being held in solitary confinement. The activists also were concerned that Bichsel, who suffers from blood circulation problems, was not receiving an adequate number of blankets to keep warm.

In a posting at the blog of the ?Disarm Now Plowshares? group [1] Jan. 19, activist Blake Kremer said Bichsel had told him ?it is very cold for me all of the time.?

?I cannot sleep at all,? Kremer reported Bichsel as saying during a phone call. ?24 hours a day without sleep, fighting off the chill. I have asked for a jacket or a pillow or a mattress; they do not comply.?

Activist Joe Power-Drutis reported this afternoon on the same blog that Bichsel has now received extra blankets and is ?much warmer,? following a support vigil for the priest outside the prison Sunday, which saw more than 40 people attend.

Power-Drutis also said there ?remains a couple of other health related issues? that the activists ?hope to resolve those soon through direct negotiation.?

Supporters say Bichsel was visited by Buddhist monks with the *Nipponzan Myohoji* order when he was moved to the Tacoma facility Jan. 10. They say the authorities at the facility reprimanded Bichsel for the visit and had him rearrested the next morning.

According to Kremer, Bichsel started his fast partly ?to unite us as one and strengthen resolve against nuclear weapons? and would be appreciative of any who would join him in the effort.

A spokesman for the Federal Bureau of Prisons said that while he couldn?t comment on the case of a specific inmate, he did say that the ?typical issue? for all inmates in the federal system is a blanket and sheet, and that there is a ?full health services staff on duty at all of our facilities.?

?If we receive information either from the inmate or the inmate?s doctor on the street that there was some sort

of pre-existing condition that was being treated, obviously we would pick up the ball from there,? said Chris Burke, a public information officer at the bureau?s headquarters in Washington, D.C.

?Now, sometimes, our doctors? treatment may differ from what [the prisoner] was receiving on the street for a lot of different reasons. But those conditions will still be treated regardless.?

Before his imprisonment for the Y-12 action, Bichsel had served a three-month sentence in the spring of 2011 for a November 2009 act of civil resistance at the U.S. Navy nuclear weapons base in Bangor, Wash.

Supporters were concerned for Bichsel during that imprisonment, as he was transferred between at least six different facilities across the country.

Writing on the ?Disarm Now Plowshares? blog, Power-Drutis said that a May visit to Bichsel in the Knox County, Tenn., Sheriff's Detention Facility found the priest ?a broken and very hurting soul.?

Twelve others participated with Bichsel in the 2010 action at the Y-12 complex, for which they faced sentencing in September.

Four others participated with the priest in the 2009 action, which saw the activists cut through the outer fences of the Washington state naval base before walking toward the center of the base holding a sign that read ?Disarm Now Plowshares Trident: Illegal Immoral? and scattering sunflower seeds and hammering on a roadway and fences.

Among the other four who participated in that action was Jesuit Fr. Steve Kelly, who has been imprisoned since April at the Seattle facility, where he is serving a 15 month sentence. According to supporters, Kelly has been in solitary for most of his imprisonment.

Two of the other three people found guilty for the 2009 action have since been released. Susan Crane, a member of the Jonah House community in Baltimore, is still being held on a 15 month sentence at the Federal Correction Institution in Dublin, Calif.

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Links:
[1] http://disarmnowplowshares.wordpress.com/