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In Memoriam: Anne Montgomery, A Doer of the Word!

Art Laffin | Sep. 15, 2012

Sr. Anne Montgomery

On August 27, 2012, God called Sr. Anne Montgomery, RSCJ, 85, home to her eternal reward after a long struggle with cancer. All who knew her lost a very special friend. The church has lost one of Jesus' most steadfast disciples and prophets. And the world has lost an extraordinary peacemaker.

Anne's life story is truly a remarkable journey of faith. The daughter of an admiral, she joined the Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus at 22. She graduated with both a bachelor?s and master?s degree from Manhattanville College, and later earned a second master?s degree from Columbia University in New York. She began to teach at the Street Academy of Albany, where she experienced the challenges faced by the poor and people of color.

In 1975, after training to educate children with learning disabilities, she returned to New York City to work with school dropouts in East Harlem. It was during this time that she also became involved with the Catholic Worker.

I first met Anne in New York City at a prayer vigil during the first United Nations Special Session on Disarmament in 1978. I was undertaking a fast in repentance for my complicity in the arms race, and a small group of us would periodically gather for a prayer vigil at the Isaiah Wall, across the street from the UN.

Anne was working in East Harlem teaching adults at the time, and was becoming more involved with peacemaking efforts, including the newly formed Kairos peace community, of which she remained a vital core member. I was living in Connecticut and, along with with several others, helping to start a small Christian peace community in New Haven.

Over the years, when I visited New York City, I would often stay with Anne and the Alethia House of Prayer community in Washington Square. Anne was truly a contemplative at heart. Joining with her, Sister Eileen Storey and other community members for early morning prayer was a very important part of my own spiritual formation.

In 1980 Anne participated in the first plowshares action known as the Plowshares Eight. This unprecedented peace witness calling for the abolition of nuclear weapons marked the beginning of a new series of actions in

which nonviolent resisters sought to enact the biblical prophecy of beating swords into plowshares. They would enter weapons facilities and military bases, and - using hammers, blood and other symbols - carry out a direct act of disarmament. There have been over 95 such actions to date.

Anne would go on to do seven other plowshares actions, including two that I was also part of, and the last of which - the Disarm Now Plowshares - took place in 2009 when she was 83. She served over three years in prison for these acts of witness.

As more people were trying to understand plowshares actions and the role of nonviolent resistance to bring about true disarmament, I approached Anne about collaborating on a book about the Plowshares actions and nonviolent resistance. Anne agreed and together we co-edited *Sword Into Plowshares*, (Harper and Row, 1987).

In 1996 we published an updated and expanded version of this book with the same title. Working with her on this project not only helped me appreciate her gifts as writer and editor, but also as one who had a profound understanding of the scriptural justification for faith-based nonviolent action.

Keenly aware that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood but the principalities and powers of this world," (Ep.6:12) Anne provided compelling insights into how nonviolent resistance actions are really experiments in truth that should be seen as acts of "divine obedience," rather than civil disobedience. She wrote:

> "Civil disobedience is traditionally the breaking of a civil law to obey a higher law, sometimes with the hope of changing the unjust civil law...But we should speak of such actions as divine obedience, rather than civil disobedience. The term "disobedience" is not appropriate because any law that does not protect and enhance life is no real law. In particular, both divine and international law tell us that weapons of mass destruction are a crime against humanity and it is the duty of the ordinary citizen to actively oppose them." (*Swords Into Plowshares*, 1996, p.1)

Anne's commitment to standing with and for the victims led her to many war-torn areas. In January 1991 Anne was part of the Gulf Peace Team Camp on the Iraq/Saudi border calling upon the US not to bomb Iraq. Anne would return to that country many more times. During her third visit to Iraq in the Autumn of 1992 Anne wrote ?Psalter-Second Watch? (from *Swords Into Plowshares*, p. 212) an excerpt from which follows:

> The heavens declared the river of God;
> the sun stepped forth from its tent of clouds
> where light and darkness wed at night, gave birth once more
> to hope.
> Awake o my soul, watch and pray,
> remember:
> Ours is the desert
> but theirs is the city of death.
> Watch with the watchman;
> dream of the garden:
> and awake the dawn of his rising.
> Then shall we not fear the terror of the night,
> nor the missile that flies by day,
> God's pinions our cover,
> our only shelter
> trust in the Almighty.

She was among those activists who held a month-long liquids-only fast in 2000 aimed at ending U.S. support for U.N. sanctions against Iraq. According to UNICEF and other human rights groups, the sanctions were

responsible for the deaths of a million Iraqi's, including 500,000 children.

Anne later became a member of the Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT), serving in Iraq, the Balkans, the West Bank, and Hebron, where I visited her three different times. I was able to see firsthand the powerful nonviolent influence Anne and other CPT members had in Hebron.

I witnessed how much she was loved by the Palestinians. I accompanied Anne in support of the Jaber family, with whom Anne had a very close relationship, and whose land was constantly under siege by the Israeli military and settlers. I also went with Anne and other CPT members to accompany other Palestinians who were trying to plant on their own land, despite death threats from settlers.

Explaining her witness in the West Bank, Anne said in an interview, "We say we're on the side of the people who have the biggest guns pointed at them. In this case, we think the (Israeli) occupation is wrong. It's wrong to take people's land, to destroy their homes, which is what the Israeli military does. As long as this unjust occupation continues, there can't be peace." (From an article posted on the Society of the Sacred Heart web site).

Anne was also deeply concerned about confronting the sin and crime of torture. In December 2005 she travelled to Cuba to join with 24 other activists from Witness Against Torture in a 70 mile walk and four day fast and vigil near the Guantanamo Naval Base to call for the closing of Guantanamo, an end to torture and indefinite detention, and justice for all the prisoners. At the age of 79, I can still see Anne often leading our walk/pilgrimage from Santiago to Guantanamo.

Following the 2010 Disarm Now plowshares trial conviction, for which she served two months in federal prison and was placed on house arrest, Anne lived with her community in Redwood City, CA. From there, in a March 1, 2012 letter to friends describing her cancer she wrote:

> "I have been on chemotherapy for cancer, and it seemed to be helping, but, last weekend I had breathing problems and tests showed a lung full of fluid and that continuing any chemo, etc. would not help. I have been blessed by so much support, personal, and medical, that I know I must share that in some way with all those across our world who lack so much and are near desperation, especially for their children.
>
> I also know that the Spirit prays at the heart of the universe and that creation is an ongoing journey of death and resurrection, however mysterious that process is. Because it is energized by Love, we can enter into it rather than count on our own weak efforts and vulnerabilities and worry about failures. When I made my final vows, our group was named, "Joy in the Faith," I am coming to believe that must somehow be possible since it is promised in the Beatitudes and that those who have nothing show us the way.
>
> I am constantly filled with gratitude to you all who have done the nitty-gritty work of peace and nonviolent action and invited me to join you. I hope to be able to do so in a new way. As Phil Berrigan said in his last letter, that work must come from our own vulnerability.
>
> Much love,
> Anne

Despite her physical limitations, Anne remained very active during the last six months of her life. Whenever I spoke with her by phone she conveyed news of peace activities on the west coast, and was very interested to know of acts of witness taking place elsewhere.

She was elated to hear about the Transform Now Plowshares action on July 28 of this year at the Y-12 nuclear weapons complex at Oak Ridge, Tennessee [1], and offered her heartfelt support. A week before she died she

was given the 2012 Courage of Conscience Award from the Peace Abbey in Sherborn, Massachusetts.

I thank God for Anne's inspiring life and for all she did to make the Word flesh! She was indeed a "doer of the Word!" Anne knew something about the cross as she stood with the crucified in war zones and spent long periods of time as prisoner. And she knew, too, something about the resurrection, as her faith was rooted in the hope that Jesus has forever overcome the forces of sin and death by His cross and rising from the dead. She exuded a joy that emanated from her love for life and God's creation.

Her life is a testament to the Gospel truth that love casts out fear and that with God all things are possible! Her unwavering commitment to nonviolence, accompanying and interceding for the victims, engaging in nonviolent resistance to systemic violence, and working with people from all over the world to create the beloved community will serve as a constant reminder of what it means to be a Gospel peacemaker. As one of many who loved and admired her, I will always treasure what I learned from Anne's exemplary life.

In a *National Catholic Reporter* interview last May [2], Anne spoke of her deep conviction that I and all believers need to take to heart:

"I also have hope in knowing that God's power and God's nonviolence are stronger than violence and war. Love is stronger than evil, hate, fear or war. The opposite of love is fear, and the government tries to keep us in permanent fear. When we come together in love and struggle for peace, we are no longer afraid and we can change things. As we trust each other and God, our fear lessens. So we can't be afraid to do the right thing. Love is always stronger, and that gives me hope."

Thank you Anne for those of us who had the privilege to be your companion in "the nitty gritty work of peace and nonviolent action." Thank you for your gentleness, wisdom, sense of humor, encouragement, humility, faithfulness and courage. Thank you for the gift of your friendship and for being such a beacon of light, love and hope for our world!!!

Your spirit of love will forever live on in the hearts of all those you touched. We now pray for your intercession as we strive to do as you did: to abolish all weapons, end war and to make God's reign of justice and peace a reality.

[Art Laffin is a member of the Dorothy Day Catholic Worker in Washington, DC.]

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