

called “post-liberal” than “anti-liberal” because he believes there was “something permanently valuable in the liberal move” (10) that must be integrated into a larger vision rather than rejected wholesale. Also, according to Allen, Barron has “no patience for today’s more militant, hard-core conservative Catholics, for whom one distinguishing trait is often hostility to the reforming Second Vatican Council” (10). Barron considers himself a son of the Council and is an admirer of Pope Francis (cf. 10, 131-35).

Barron and Allen’s book serves equally well as a short biography of Barron and as a field guide for evangelization. It provides remarkable insights into one of the most important voices in contemporary American Catholicism and about the world he wishes to set on fire with the love for the Word.

Christian Raab, OSB

FOREST, Jim, *At Play in the Lions’ Den: A Biography and Memoir of Daniel Berrigan* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), pp. 352. ISBN 978-1-6269-8248-2 (paper) \$30.00.

In the minds of those who remember him, Jesuit Dan Berrigan, famed and much-arrested peace activist, might be associated chiefly with two highly dramatic events in our nation’s history of protest – the burning of draft cards at Catonsville, Maryland and the denting of nose cones at the General Electric plant in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania, where parts for nuclear weapons were being busily produced. And so Jim Forest’s superb and richly detailed biography and memoir, *At Play in the Lions’ Den*, is a welcome and essential source for those wishing to know more about this brilliant and vibrant priest, prophet and poet, whose life was profoundly rooted in the unequivocal word of God: *Thou shalt not kill*.

Forest, whose deep friendship with Berrigan began in 1964, and who was intimately involved in many of the events he writes about, had an “up close and personal” knowledge of Berrigan’s thought and activities, giving his book a unique perspective and authenticity. Having become part of the story, Forest records it from the inside, and this review will follow his guided tour through the turbulent and often dizzying years of Berrigan’s life as an anti-war activist, as well as a poet, teacher, priest, and finally, volunteer ministering to the sick and dying.

Berrigan’s anti-war passion, Forest tells the reader, was not inborn. It was because of the times he lived in that he experienced a “gradual awakening,” which developed into a commitment to oppose war, all war, especially the war in Vietnam, and the machinery of war, specifically nuclear weapons. This awakening began while the young Berrigan was in his first teaching assignment at a Jersey City Jesuit prep school. Discovering, to his delight,

his talent for connecting with and inspiring students other teachers found impossible, he also found time to do reading unconnected to his assignments. One was *God and the Atom*, by Ronald Knox.<sup>1</sup> It raised in Dan, for the first time, troubling questions. Knox had proposed that, during World War II, the U.S. could have dropped the atom bomb on an uninhabited island instead of on two cities. Its explosive force would show the Japanese the bomb's immense destructive power, and likely have saved many thousands of innocent lives.

The young Jesuit read some of Knox to his class of fifteen-year-olds and caused quite a stir. But the students' vigorous objections gave Dan pause, and he began pondering how easily Catholics – and other Christians – accept the violence of war. A trip to Germany during his tertianship as an assistant to a Jesuit army chaplain only gave him, later on, further misgivings and questions about how easily he had accepted our military presence there, even though "nuclear weapons studded the landscape." The chaplains, he wrote, were as militarized as the soldiers and wore their uniform not only on their body but "upon their soul" (35).

Not long afterward, now teaching in New York at Brooklyn Prep, he tried to help his students "catch fire and burn" (39). Taking them to a Puerto Rican mission to do volunteer work (now called "service learning"), he was near the Catholic Worker House and met, inevitably, Dorothy Day, who became one of the most influential persons in his life. "She taught me more than all the theologians," he said (40). This included the connection between war-making and human misery. Still, Forest notes, it took Berrigan several more years to embrace a complete rejection of war. Perhaps the person most influential in Berrigan's life over the long haul was his brother Phil, at the time a Josephite priest ministering in New Orleans and an outspoken opponent of racism and segregation. Phil, in some ways more radical than Dan at this point, would strengthen Berrigan's anti-war convictions. Another strong influence on Berrigan, and till his death both friend and mentor, was Thomas Merton.

In 1957, Berrigan, who had published several poems in various journals, was asked by Macmillan to submit a book of them. Titled *Time without Number*, it won for Berrigan the coveted Lamont Poetry Prize and was nominated for a National Book Award. One poem that particularly impressed the judges was "Credentials." It concludes with these lines:

So the rose is its own credential, a certain  
unattainable effortless form; wearing its heart  
visibly, it gives us heart too: bud, fullness and fall. (47)

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1. Ronald Knox, *God and the Atom* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1945).

His poetry career now “truly launched,” as Forest put it, Berrigan was to later write that “With the publication of my first book, my mind exploded.” Becoming a well-known name in literary circles, Berrigan was aware that publishers would now take almost anything he submitted, and that “the question of quality was largely in my own hands and my own sense of things” (47). He would publish more than fifty books of both poetry and prose during his long life.

In the fall of 1957, now teaching New Testament at Le Moyne College in Syracuse, New York, Berrigan increasingly felt his vocation called him to move beyond the classroom. During this time, Berrigan became impressed with the writings of Thomas Merton and wrote him after reading *The Seven Storey Mountain*. But it was Merton’s article “The Root of War,” published in the *Catholic Worker*, which profoundly affected Berrigan. With nuclear weapons, Merton had written, there could never be a “just war.” Our obligation was to work for the complete abolition of war, but the problem was the “blindness and passivity of Christians” (51). This article led to another letter from Berrigan and finally a meeting with Merton. From this emerged a lengthy friendship lasting until Merton’s death.

Eventually Berrigan founded the International House on campus, where he lived with students and guided them in linking their faith with works of social justice. These led to an examination of local slums and slumlords and learning some of the latter were large donors to the college. When results of their research were published, many in Syracuse were not well pleased, and Berrigan was given a sabbatical in Europe for the following year. At its end, he was not invited back to Le Moyne.

The sabbatical in Europe, where Berrigan and author Jim Forest met for a second time and formed a strong and lasting friendship, opened the young Jesuit’s eyes to the reality that the war in Vietnam could only get worse. Back in the U.S., Berrigan, Jim Forest and Jim Douglass founded the Catholic Peace Fellowship, with Forest as its first full-time staff person. Soon, Berrigan and others gathered at Gethsemani, where Merton hosted a retreat in the fall of 1964 to consider the “spiritual roots of protest.” During it, the story of Franz Jägerstätter, who refused to serve in Hitler’s army and was consequently executed, became an icon of war resistance and deeply affected Berrigan and others. Berrigan had noted that the Church leaders in Germany were quiet while the war continued, and then asked which American bishops had spoken out against the making and using of nuclear weapons. “The church’s fearfulness,” he said, “is our confession of unconvertedness” (71).

Phil Berrigan, having been too radical for New Orleans, was reas-

signed to the Bronx, a move that allowed much more involvement with others at the Catholic Peace Fellowship and especially with his brother. As heavy bombing in Vietnam was increasing U.S. involvement, both brothers, along with others, signed a declaration of conscience. Among other things, it encouraged young men “who can conscientiously do so” to refuse military service. It also urged the development of “acts of civil disobedience” to oppose the flow of arms and soldiers to Vietnam.

Yearning to go to Vietnam, Dan soon got his desire fulfilled unexpectedly when Hanoi asked for a small delegation to come over and bring back to the States three newly released prisoners. With historian Howard Zinn, Dan jumped at the chance. While in Hanoi, they experienced siren-filled nights and one of actual bombing. “Being an American under American bombs was an education without parallel,” he said on his return (115). But what haunted him were the children. Visiting a bomb shelter, he saw quiet children sitting there, one feeding her tiny brother, whose face was “breaded with rice.” Berrigan held him and concluded his poem “Children in the Shelter” with the lines:

In my arms fathered  
in a moment’s grace, the messiah  
of all my tears. I bore, reborn  
a Hiroshima child from hell. (115)

This experience clearly radicalized Berrigan, soon to participate in his first dramatic act of civil disobedience – burning draft files at Catonsville. Phil, out on bail for pouring blood on draft records in Baltimore, initially had difficulty persuading his brother to join this action. Dan was perplexed about whether or not it would be crossing the line between violence and non-violence. Ultimately, though, he did join, and the Catonsville Nine performed its nation-shocking deed.

In his testimony at the subsequent trial, Dan Berrigan said in part, “So I went to Hanoi, and then to Catonsville, and that’s why I am here.” He added, “I went to Catonsville because my brother was a man and I must be a man” (118). This group had stood around a small blaze in a Maryland parking lot watching draft files burn and, Forest says, “The lives of the nine and many others would never be the same.” Although the immediate reaction was largely negative, Berrigan felt that the small fire lit in the parking lot had become “a new fire, new as Pentecost.” “Nothing can be done!” he had often heard. But, he concluded, “Indeed, something could be done; and was. And would be.”

After serving just eighteen months in Danbury Prison, Berrigan was released because of a severe health crisis. His demonstrating and protest-

ing, however, continued. And his writing.

Two years later, he wrote a play entitled *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine*. It included words Dan had written back at Catonsville:

Our apologies, good friends, for the fracture of good order,  
the burning of paper instead of children, the angering of the  
orderlies in the front parlor of the charnel house.

We could not, so help us God, do otherwise. (5)

Berrigan formed a friendship with the Vietnamese Buddhist monk and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh, whom he met at a poetry reading in Manhattan, and there were many visits and lengthy dialogues. At one point, after discussing war and death and philosophy, Dan celebrated by cooking a meal, something he did frequently. Forest claims Berrigan always had about himself a sense of “vibrant celebration” (198).

Berrigan’s many travels took him to Ireland and to Nicaragua, where he met with priest and poet Ernesto Cardenal, part of the Sandinista revolution. He sadly found that Cardenal believed taking up arms could be justified – if done with love. Berrigan didn’t agree, and later wrote a lengthy letter to Cardenal calling the weapons “contaminated” because “There is blood on them, as on our hands” (215).

After much discernment, Phil left the priesthood and married former nun Liz McAllister. Together they started Jonah House, a community and organizing base. The year 1980 marked a turning point for the activists. Becoming aware of a General Electric plant which was developing first strike nuclear weaponry, they decided a significant action was needed to alert the public. Again, Phil persuaded a somewhat reluctant Dan, reluctant mainly because his first prison stint almost ended his life, to join seven others. Someone suggested taking from the Old Testament the line from Isaiah: “They shall turn their swords into plowshares.” The group approved of this and moved forward with plans.

On September 9, the eight entered the GE building, dented part of two missile shields and poured blood on blueprints and equipment before kneeling and singing hymns, waiting to be arrested. They soon were. During the trial, Dan was allowed to speak about the reasons for his involvement. Among other things he said was this: “we are not allowed to kill innocent people. We are not allowed to be complicit in murder. . . We are back where we started. Thou shalt not kill. We are not allowed to kill. Everything today comes down to that” (226). At the trial’s end, responding to the judge’s rage, the Plowshares Eight stood and turned their backs on him. Almost immediately, those in the courtroom did the same (227). The appeal process dragged on for almost ten years, but it

did not stop these peacemakers, who were, of course, out on bail. This first “Plowshares” event was memorialized in a film entitled *In the King of Prussia*, starring Martin Sheen. Sheen, throughout the filming, became a good friend of both the Berrigans, saying at one point, “Mother Teresa brought me back into the Church and Dan Berrigan kept me there” (228).

The Berrigans continued to protest in acts of civil disobedience, Dan being arrested for the last time at ninety. None of their other actions was as spectacular as these two events, though they often led to jail or prison sentences. Eventually, an aging Dan Berrigan, after a teaching career that included Cornell, Woodstock, Yale, Berkeley, Manitoba and the University of Detroit, began a new ministry at St. Rose’s Home, a hospice for destitute cancer patients. He moved into a large Jesuit community, filling his room with art work and posters. On his door hung the slogan: “When Jesus said to love your enemies, he probably meant don’t kill them” (253). His community found him both “disturbing” and “delightful” (253), disturbing because of the challenging questions he posed to them, and delightful because of his wit and the meals he frequently cooked.

With the advent of the AIDS epidemic, he began volunteering once a week at St. Vincent’s Hospital, a ministry he continued for twelve years. Calling himself a “listener of last resort,” he did much more than listen, often bathing and washing soiled clothes – and frequently bringing presents and “his great gifts of companionship and joyful affection,” as another priest put it. Through all his involvements, Berrigan kept writing and joining in various anti-war protests. Friend and fellow Jesuit activist John Dear estimates he was arrested about 250 times (267).

One unique opportunity came when he was asked to be advisor to the filming of *The Mission*, Roland Joffé’s 1986 historical drama about the Jesuits in eighteenth-century South America. He agreed, and this took him to several Latin American countries, where he enjoyed interacting with stars Robert De Niro and Jeremy Irons. The film was nominated for seven Oscars, including Best Picture.

At ninety, Berrigan was moved to a Jesuit infirmary on the campus of Fordham University. He continued to be alert and entertained guests frequently, including friends John Dear and Robert Ellsberg. Even late in life, Forest says, Berrigan could be challenging to visit. His great theme was peacemaking, and his very life seemed to ask people to “get out of the tomb and make some gestures, however modest, that favor life” (291).

If Dan was the consummate social activist, he also had a special gift for friendship. He loved hosting guests and cooking for them. And yet the Mass was the center of his life. “When I hear the sound of bread breaking, I see something else. It seems almost as though God never meant us to do

anything else. So beautiful a sound. The crust breaks up like manna and falls all over everything and then we eat. Bread gets inside humans” (315).

*At Play in the Lions’ Den*, while a compelling read, is not a hagiography. Forest records several mistakes Berrigan made, and regretted, and shows the reader as well his human weaknesses. His anti-war crusade, Forest recalls, was possibly more criticized during his lifetime than admired, almost getting him expelled from the Jesuit order. Still, in this carefully researched biography and memoir, Jim Forest resurfaces with great affection not only this beloved activist priest, but the heady times in which he lived and of which he was such a key voice and heroic example. Adding to the pleasure of the book’s narrative, which Forest tells clearly and engagingly, are the multitude of photographs, at least one on virtually every page, allowing the reader to visually follow the life of one of the great Catholics of our times. In Forest’s capable hands, Daniel Berrigan, poet, priest and prophet, will continue to inspire those who seek models for living the gospel with both passion and grace.

Berrigan once said, “If you want to follow Jesus, you had better look good on wood” (xiv). Daniel Berrigan *did* look good on wood. And how would he have summed up his life? In his words, put on a “supplementary” tombstone after his death, “It was never dull, alleluia!” (306). Reading Forest’s fine book amply explains why.

Patricia L. Schnapp, RSM