

## **In Memoriam: Daniel J. Berrigan, SJ (1921-2016)**

Peace activist, prolific author of poetry and prose, and correspondent and close friend of Thomas Merton in the turbulent 1960s, Daniel J. Berrigan, SJ died on April 30, 2016, nine days before his ninety-fifth birthday, at Murray-Weigel Hall, the Jesuit residence on the campus of Fordham University in New York. Best known for his acts of nonviolent disobedience against the Vietnam War and the proliferation of nuclear weapons, he was considered, along with theologians John Courtney Murray and Avery Dulles, to be one of the most influential American Jesuits of the twentieth century, according to his obituary in *America*, the Jesuit weekly. He had been a member of the order for 76 years, 63 of them as a priest.

Born May 9, 1921 in Virginia, MN, the fifth of six sons of Thomas Berrigan, a railroad engineer, labor activist and farmer, and Frida Fromhart Berrigan, as a young child he moved with his family to a farm outside Syracuse, NY, where he grew up. After graduating from high school in 1939, he entered the novitiate of the New York Province of the Society of Jesus at St. Andrew-on-Hudson, NY, receiving a bachelor's degree at the seminary there in 1946 and a master's degree from the Jesuits' Woodstock College in Baltimore in 1952, and was ordained a priest in June of that same year. As a scholastic he had taught at St. Peter's Prep in Jersey City, NJ, and brought students from his classes into Manhattan to help out at the Catholic Worker House there, founded by Dorothy Day, beginning a relationship with the pacifist movement that would continue throughout the rest of his life. He spent the year after ordination working and studying in France, where he came in contact with the worker-priest movement that identified the authentic church with the poor and neglected, followed by three years teaching theology and French at the Jesuits' Brooklyn Preparatory School. He then taught dogmatic theology and scripture at Lemoyne College in Syracuse, another Jesuit institution, from 1957 through 1963. In 1957, the first of his fifteen volumes of poetry, *Time Without Number*,<sup>1</sup> was awarded the prestigious Lamont Poetry Prize. *The Bride: Essays on the Church*,<sup>2</sup> the first of dozens of books of essays, social criticism, biblical commentaries and autobiographical reflections,<sup>3</sup> appeared in 1959.

After a year of travel through Europe and South Africa in 1963, Berrigan returned to become an editor at *Jesuit Missions* magazine and more significantly, to inspire the growing religious resistance to the Vietnam War as one of the founders of Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam and of the Catholic Peace Fellowship. His opposition to the war led to a brief "exile" in South America in 1964, where he experienced the poverty and oppression of the masses, and from which he returned home further radicalized. His early antiwar activities culminated on May 17, 1968, when along with his brother Philip, at the time a Josephite priest, and seven other activists, he participated in a raid on the draft board in Catonsville, MD, where hundreds of Selective Service files were seized and burned with homemade napalm in the adjacent parking lot. The Catonsville Nine were arrested, tried and convicted for damaging federal property, after which both brothers and some of the other members of the group went underground, refusing to report to prison as a further protest against what they considered the injustice and illegality of the American war in southeast Asia. After four months of numerous appearances and disappearances Daniel Berrigan was apprehended by the FBI on Block

Island, NY in August, 1970, subsequently spending eighteen months at the Danbury, CT Federal Prison. On Sept. 9, 1980, with his brother Philip and six others, he participated in another high-profile act of civil disobedience, breaking into the General Electric Co. plant in King of Prussia, PA and symbolically “disarming” with hammers two Mark 12A nuclear-missile nose-cones, the first action of the Plowshares movement, taking its name from the passage in the Prophet Isaiah about turning swords into plowshares. Facing up to ten years in prison, members of the group were sentenced to time already served after their arrest.

During these decades Berrigan also continued his teaching, writing, activism and ministry to the poor. At various times he was on the faculty or staff at Cornell University, Union Theological Seminary, Loyola University New Orleans, Columbia, Yale and other educational institutions, with his last and longest position at Fordham, where he lectured and served as poet in residence. As a member of the West Side Jesuit Community in Manhattan between 1976 and 2012, he cared for dying residents at the Rose Hawthorne Cancer Home and for AIDS patients at St. Vincent Hospital and local hospices. He was also a leader of the Kairos Community, a group of activists who met regularly for scripture study and nonviolent action. An advocate of the “seamless garment” approach to life issues championed by Catholic Worker Eileen Egan and Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, he served on the advisory board of Consistent Life, an organization that describes itself as “committed to the protection of life, which is threatened in today’s world by war, abortion, poverty, racism, capital punishment and euthanasia.” Berrigan continued his activism into his ninth decade, protesting the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the continued imprisonment without trial of inmates at Guantanamo Bay. He spent an estimated total of seven years in prison for his acts of civil disobedience.

Fr. Berrigan’s funeral mass was held at St. Francis Xavier Church in lower Manhattan on May 6, following a procession from Mary House, a nearby Catholic Worker home for the destitute. Daniel Berrigan was preceded in death by his younger brother Philip, who died on December 6, 2002 at age 79, and his older brother, Jerome, also an antiwar activist, who died in July 2015 at age 95, as well as brothers Thomas, John and James, and his parents.

Berrigan’s association with Thomas Merton began in 1961 when he wrote the monk to express his appreciation for Merton’s first article on peace in *The Catholic Worker*. Their extensive correspondence, filled with discussion on war and peace, poverty and racial justice, church renewal



Daniel Berrigan, SJ – August 1962

and other contemporary social and religious issues, and marked by increasing warmth and mutual support and appreciation, continued through the rest of Merton’s life, with most of Merton’s letters appearing in the first volume of his selected letters, *The Hidden Ground of Love*.<sup>4</sup> Berrigan’s first visit to Gethsemani took place in August 1962. He participated in the ecumenical peacemakers’ retreat arranged by Merton at Gethsemani in November 1964,<sup>5</sup> and made three subsequent visits to the monastery in the following years. In 1968, Merton dedicated his commentary on Camus’ novel *The Plague* to Berrigan.<sup>6</sup> After Merton’s death,

Berrigan wrote and published an elegy in five parts entitled “‘The Trappist Cemetery – Gethsemani’ Revisited,”<sup>7</sup> and eventually wrote and spoke often of the importance of Merton’s friendship for the development of his own spiritual and moral convictions.<sup>8</sup>

To commemorate the life and witness of Daniel Berrigan, and especially his friendship with Thomas Merton, this special memorial issue of *The Merton Seasonal* makes available for the first time transcriptions of four talks given by Berrigan, a presentation and conversation on his relationship with Merton at Bellarmine University in Louisville, KY from May 2004, and three conferences to Cistercian novices on the occasion of his first visit to the Abbey of Gethsemani four decades earlier, in August 1962, all from recordings housed in the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine. Special thanks to Merton Center Director Paul M. Pearson for providing the recordings on which these lightly edited transcriptions have been based, and for contributing the introduction to Berrigan’s 2004 Bellarmine presentation.

1. Daniel J. Berrigan, SJ, *Time Without Number* (New York: Macmillan, 1957).
2. Daniel J. Berrigan, SJ, *The Bride: Essays on the Church* (New York: Macmillan, 1959).
3. See for example the anthology Daniel Berrigan, *Poetry, Drama, Prose*, ed. Michael True (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988); Daniel Berrigan, *To Dwell in Peace: An Autobiography* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987); Daniel Berrigan, *Essential Writings*, ed. John Dear (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009). Most recent is *The Berrigan Letters: Personal Correspondence between Daniel and Philip Berrigan*, ed. Daniel Cosacchi and Eric Martin (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2016). See also Ross Labrie, *The Writings of Daniel Berrigan* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989).
4. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 70-101.
5. See Gordon Oyer, *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest: Merton, Berrigan, Yoder, and Muste at the Gethsemani Abbey Peacemaker Retreat* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014).
6. Thomas Merton, *Albert Camus’ The Plague* (New York: Seabury, 1968).
7. Daniel Berrigan, “‘The Trappist Cemetery – Gethsemani’ Revisited,” *Continuum* 7.2 (Summer 1969) 313-18.
8. See especially “The Monk” in Daniel Berrigan, *Portraits – Of Those I Love* (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 13-31; Daniel Berrigan, “Thomas Merton on Peace and Nuclear War,” *Cistercian Studies* 17.4 (1982) 366-72; Daniel Berrigan, “The Peacemaker,” in *Thomas Merton/Monk: A Monastic Tribute*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart, rev. ed. (Kalamzoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1983) 219-27; Daniel Berrigan, “What, Then, Must We Do?” *The Merton Annual* 11 (1998) 49-66; “Thomas Merton, Friend and Monk,” in Daniel Berrigan, *Testimony: The Word Made Flesh* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004) 102-105. See also Ross Labrie, “Striving for Balance: The Relationship between Thomas Merton and Daniel Berrigan,” *Canadian Catholic Review* 10.4 (April 1992) 17-22; Mary Luke Tobin, SL, “Merton and Berrigan: An Extraordinary Friendship, Two Extraordinary Spirits,” in *Apostles of Peace: Essays in Honor of Daniel Berrigan*, ed. John Dear, SJ (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996) 210-13; Michael Callaghan, CM, “Dorothy Day, Daniel Berrigan and Thomas Merton: The Disobedience of Waiting for Godot,” *Cithara* 41.2 (May 2002) 30-35.