

PURSuing THE SPIRITUAL ROOTS OF PROTEST

Book Review: Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest - Merton, Berrigan, Yoder, and Muste at the Gethsemani Abbey Peacemakers Retreat. By Gordon Oyer. Cascade Books. \$33.

By SANDI HUCKABY

Fifty years ago a momentous event occurred that most of us may be completely unaware of. For those in the peace movement, it was something on par of the gods gathering in Mount Olympus, except much bigger. In this case, Mt. Olympus was the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani, in Kentucky, and the "gods" were the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, the founders of the Catholic Peace fellowship, Daniel and Philip Berrigan, Tom Cornell, and Jim Forest. Also attending were the Mennonite scholar, John Howard Yoder and A.J. Muste, the former executive secretary of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) and one of the most distinguished members of the U.S. peace movement. In all there were fourteen men, Protestant and Catholic, who gathered for a unique three-day retreat in November, 1964, to pray together and to discuss the spiritual roots needed to nurture sound motives for nonviolent protest.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bayard Rustin were interested in attending, but were unable to, since both were making preparations for the trip to Oslo where King would be accepting the Nobel Peace Prize. Dorothy Day would have been another great addition to the mix, but unfortunately the abbey had strict rules that only men could participate in overnight retreats there. However, Tom Cornell and Jim Forest were articulate voices of the Catholic Worker movement and its commitment to serving the poor and challenging the structures that oppress the poor.

Oh, to have been a fly on the wall at this historic gathering. There were no tape recorders present, memories have faded, and some of the participants have passed on. However, thankfully, through meticulous research and interviews, Gordon Oyer has been able to piece together much of what was discussed and presented in this marvelous book just in time for the retreat's 50th anniversary.

A major turning point in the escalation of the Vietnam War came in 1964. How to respond to this horrific war through faith-based non-violent protest was uppermost in the minds of Merton and the FOR organizers. One of the organizers, Ping Ferry, had underwritten the translation of Jacques Ellul's book, *The Technological Society*, into English and had just sent a copy to Merton in October, only three weeks before the retreat was to begin. The book had a profound impact on Merton, who said it was, "Great, full of firecrackers. A fine provocative book and one that really makes sense." A few days later he added, "How few people really face the problem! It is the most portentous and apocalyptic thing of all, that we are caught in an automatic self-determining system in which man's choices have largely ceased to count." Ellul had written that tech-



Daniel Berrigan and Thomas Merton

TEN COMMANDMENTS FOR THE LONG HAUL

By DANIEL BERRIGAN

Poet/activist/priest Daniel Berrigan turned 93 this past May. A special thank you to Jim Forest for sending us Dan's Ten Commandments for the long haul.

- 1) Call on Jesus when all else fails. Call on Him when all else succeeds (except that never happens).
- 2) Do not be afraid to be afraid or appalled to be appalled. How do you think the trees feel these days, or the whales, or, for that matter, most humans?
- 3) Keep your soul to yourself. Soul is a possession worth paying for; they are growing rarer. Learn from monks. They have secrets worth knowing.
- 4) About practically everything in the world, there is nothing you can do. This is Socratic wisdom. However, about a few things you can do something. Do it, with a good heart.
- 5) On a long drive, there is bound to

be a dull stretch or two. Don't go anywhere with someone who expects you to be interesting all the time. And don't be hard on your fellow travelers. Try to smile after a coffee stop.

- 6) Practically no one has the stomach to love you, if you do not love yourself. They just endure. So do you.
- 7) About healing: The gospels tell us that this was Jesus' specialty and he was heard to say: "Take up your couch and walk!"
- 8) When traveling on an airplane, watch the movie, but don't use the earphones. Then you will be able to see what's going on, but not understand what's happening, and so you will feel right at home, little different than you do on the ground.
- 9) Know that sometimes the only writing material you have is your own blood.
- 10) Start with the impossible. Proceed calmly towards the improbable. NO worry, there are at least five exits.

nique is the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency in every field of human activity. Modern technology has produced a world in which means determine ends and become ends in themselves. Technology makes war almost inevitable since that which is possible to do becomes necessary to do. Oyer points out, "Merton came to believe that the spiritual integrity of protest activity depended on awareness of technique and its mechanical expressions." He was determined to include a discussion of these concepts with the retreat participants.

However, Ellul was not the only French scholar whose ideas Merton wanted to include in the discussions. Merton had been corresponding with Louis Massignon since 1959 and was deeply moved by the concept that salvation comes from the most afflicted and despised, not from the privileged and powerful. According to Oyer, Massignon "did not believe demonstrations could stop the war, but only that they could bear witness to the truth in honor and friendship,"

and that such "bearing witness was not a judgment, but an act of invitation to see reality through another's eyes." His unique combination of mysticism and public engagement on behalf of others profoundly influenced Merton and formed part of his opening remarks on the topic of the monastic protest, the voice in the wilderness. Merton concluded that access to the real spiritual roots of protest—our "detachment from privilege and embrace of the underprivileged—required detachment from technological excesses..."

To point out the seductive nature of expediency and effectiveness, Merton used the example of Franz Jagerstatter, whose steadfast and lonely witness against his Nazi occupiers seemed by everyone at the time to be a useless, selfish act. By choosing martyrdom over being drafted into the army, his church, family, and friends all abandoned him and denounced his "useless" choice. What did he accomplish? In the world's eyes, nothing; but in God's eyes his faithfulness is profound. Is not God the one who in Mary's Magnificat

deposes the mighty/the privileged from their thrones? Is not the Bible full of stories of God choosing those who had been rejected by others? Thus Merton concluded we must refuse our own privilege, for the "real roots" of protest are planted in our identification with the underprivileged.

This theme continued the following day when it was John Howard Yoder's turn to lead the discussion. "In numerous crucial situations," he said, "the way to overcome your enemy is to lose to him. The ultimate power is the Cross. Christ did not come to deliver a history of effectiveness, but of martyrdom."

Twice the participants celebrated Mass together and even the liturgy broke new ground. Not only was it unusual at the time for clergy and laity, Catholics and Protestants to attend a retreat together, but an ecumenical Mass was almost shocking. Instead of the Mass in Latin, Fr. Dan Berrigan said it in English, had everyone gather in a circle around the altar, and had Yoder, a Protestant, give the homily. The abbot had made it very clear to Merton that the Protestants were not allowed to partake of the Eucharist. However, the Holy Spirit is not to be thwarted and all received equally.

On the final day of the retreat, A. J. Muste talked about the paradox of nations seeking disarmament by building more and more arms. "This behavior has become so ingrained in the logic of realpolitik that modern nations actually see their own expanding arsenals as enhancing peace."

Daniel Berrigan suggested that perhaps there was "a way to anchor the peace movement in local service to the poor," rather than set sights on some kind of far out plan for the world. Ultimately, "we find what most of life is about by serving the minority." When we do, "life gets more black and white, [exposing us to both] more freedom and more anguish." It may seem "ineffectual" but in truth it becomes "radiating." Such "ironic moments of concrete service are our illumination," moments where humanity in the flesh, not ideas, is at stake.

As the retreat drew to a close, all agreed that motivating others through words of inspiration was not enough. What is required is vulnerability and risk to actually begin living out a better way, "to live it together with others, and to live it for all to see."

One month later, the largest anti-war demonstration to date took place in nine cities across the U.S. Six of the retreatants became heavily involved in nonviolent direct action that led to lengthy prison sentences. Tom Cornell burned his draft card and did five months in jail. Phil Berrigan poured blood on draft files. Then on May 17, 1968, both Phil and Dan burned draft files with homemade napalm in Catonsville, Maryland. Five months after the Catonsville action, there was another draft file burning in Milwaukee, this time by Robert Cunnane, Jim Forest, and twelve others, resulting in a one-year prison term. In 1970, Phil Berrigan and Elizabeth McAlister married

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block area had, as it does today, four large evangelical missions as well as numerous other small Protestant missions. They all served a meal, but they required that the men listen to a sermon before eating. So when the Catholic Worker opened its doors, folks did not know what to make of us just because we just served a free meal and did not preach. Because many of us were young and affected the singular male fashion statement of the era, long hair, our "street name" became the "Hippie Kitchen." We were a bunch of long-haired hippie, anti-authoritarian dropouts who had found a home at the Catholic Worker. We were a scruffy, long-haired, unshaven crew, and the most unlikely to succeed at much of anything, much less "make a difference." Yet what happened was quite the opposite.

Because we were there and we had a presence and spoke with authority, poverty lawyers sought us out as clients in their effort to stop the destruction of Skid Row and save 5,000 units of low-cost housing. Because we were there, Nancy Minte sought us out, and as a young lawyer, joined the Catholic Worker to open a legal clinic that still serves the poor and homeless to this day. If we had not been there, Tanya Tull would not have come to Skid Row and opened Para Los Niños to serve the children of poor immigrants. If we had not been there, Alice Callaghan would not have come to work with the Skid Row immigrant families and establish the Skid Row Housing Trust to provide low-cost housing for the poor and homeless. If we had not been there, washing pots and ladling soup, John Dillon would never have founded the Chrystalis Center, which still works to help the homeless and unemployed find work. If we had not been there, Frank Rice would not have come out of his tall office building and trekked down to Skid Row to found LAMP, one of the most progressive services for the mentally ill in the country. If we had not been there, none of our 12 "sister houses" serving the poor and homeless throughout the country and in Mexico, Haiti, and Africa as well, would exist. And countless people would have perished. Most every week, a formerly homeless man or woman comes up to tell me, "You saved my life when I was on the streets."

It is a bit like that old 1940s movie "It's a Wonderful Life," in which Jimmy Stewart is saved by an angel when he tries to commit suicide because he thinks he is a failure; he wanted to be a "big shot" in the big city. But he has not done the great "big shot" things that he had hoped to do with his life. Then the angel shows him a vision of what his town would be like if he had not been there to counter the capitalist rapaciousness of Mr. Potter.

If we had not been there, Skid Row would look like a Yuppie "Potterville" instead of what it is, a haven for the downtrodden.

When you have the audacity to do the seemingly useless; when you decide to step outside the norms and expectations of your social setting; when you step outside Mr. Potter's capitalist project; when career, salary, job security, and retirement plans are not as important as doing the right thing and saving the integrity of your inner being; when you wash pots, ladle soup, eat beans, and speak the truth "as one having authority," you will be reviled.

It is not a job; it is not a career. There is no health care plan, no 501K, no retirement benefits. It is not a job. It is a vocation. It is a prodigal, profligate, wasteful adventure. It is an adventure in which you get to give away everything, expecting nothing in return. If the cops and the bureaucrats and the city functionaries revile you and put you in jail, if your own family thinks you are out of your mind, then count yourself lucky. You are in good company, "for this is what they did to the Prophets" and to all of the writers and artists who ever spoke the truth. This is what they did to Socrates, Galileo, and Van Gogh, and to Jesus Christ himself. You get to kick ass, speak the truth, call a spade a spade. You get to curse and say "fuck" whenever you like and let the chips fall where they may. It is a kind of sacred freedom.

I am not lucky. Actually, I am blessed. Ω

Jeff Dietrich is a Los Angeles Catholic Worker community member and editor of the Agitator.

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comfort that I am used to, given such an interrogation. If you were to ask me that same question right now, I might well squirm. However, I met his gaze with all the resolution I could muster—an easier task than I could have imagined it would be—and replied, "What do you think, brother?" He immediately dropped to his knees right there on the bus in public, still holding my hand, and began an articulation that was one-half glossolalia (speaking in tongues) and one-half a prayer that God would recognize me when I got to the pearly gates. Lord, it was glorious!

There I was again dancing on the raw edge between religious affirmation and my usual die-hard agnosticism. Reference the poem "Just Like Jacob I Have a Dream" from *Buffalo Laughter* for a similar dance on the page as it imagines how I will be spending time in "purgatory." In any case, I hope you will read my book. I am vain enough to want you to read it, and I will be donating the entire proceeds from some of the sales to the Los Angeles Catholic Worker (look for ordering information elsewhere in this issue). Perhaps you will be able to answer the question "What do you think, brother?" that I am so perversely unwilling to answer myself. There is a line in my poem "Use" that says "we can't baptize ourselves/ others have to do it." Lend me your wisdom. Ω

Richard Nester is a longtime friend of the Los Angeles Catholic Worker

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I will donate the entire proceeds from the sale of 20 copies of my poetry book *Buffalo Laughter* to the LACW. If you send me your name, address, and a check for \$15 made out to the Los Angeles Catholic Worker, I will mail you a copy of *Buffalo Laughter*.

Write me at: Richard Nester, 26332 Loch Glen, Lake Forest, CA 92630.

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and together formed Jonah House, a community of resistance, which gave birth to the Plowshares Movement.

However, it was the Catonsville action that author Gordon Oyer

points to as perhaps the most significant legacy that came out of the Gethsemani retreat. Dan Berrigan had formed a strong friendship with William Stringfellow, which further sharpened Berrigan's social critique and activism. They talked at length about Jacques Ellul's ideas and also about the "Principalities and Powers" at work in large institutions, especially those involved with carrying out the war policy. Both Dan and Phil went underground at Stringfellow's house to be "fugitives from injustice" and refuse to report for imprisonment. The tensions of this situation, and the articles written about it, had a profound effect on the peace movement as a whole, and indeed it has gone down as one of the legendary and memorable war protests. For years, the shackled hands of Dan giving the peace sign were on the masthead of the *Catholic Agitator*.

In the book's epilogue, Oyer tries to bring the reader up to date on what is still going on in the peace movement fifty years later. Aside from some excellent quotes from an interview Oyer did with Liz McAllister, the epilogue is woefully inadequate. For instance, I found it odd that the book never mentions the Los Angeles Catholic Worker or any of its sister houses, nor any of the latest actions that have been taking place at Vandenberg Air Force Base by the Beatitude House Catholic Worker.

Be that as it may, I did enjoy seeing all the connections between the topics Merton chose to discuss at the retreat and those same topics still being discussed at Hennacy House. I was living in the community in the decade of the 90s, and I remember every Friday Jeff Dietrich would lead the community in discussions about Ellul and technique, and countless articles about it appeared in the *Agitator*.

Also, William Stringfellow's ideas were studied in depth. Sister Mary Luke Tobin was invited to talk to us about Merton's legacy. We engaged in centering prayer in our poustinia to keep ourselves and our actions grounded in contemplation. Every Wednesday was devoted to Bible study in the community room on the third floor, and we pored over the Gospel of Mark, or the prophets and so much more. We poured blood and oil on the marble steps of the downtown Federal Building in public witness against the Persian Gulf War and did longer and longer stretches in jail. We returned to those marbles steps again and again, sometimes pouring oil, sometimes pouring ashes and calling for repentance. And all the while feeding and sheltering the homeless, caring for the sick and the marginalized.

Now, thanks to Gordon Oyer's new book, we can see the thread that links together all of that non-violent witness with what happened in a Kentucky abbey fifty years ago. The gathering together of those individuals who opened themselves to the Holy Spirit in prayer, reflection, and the sharing of ideas was like a Mother Tree who then dispersed her seeds to be carried all over the world, sometimes bearing fruit in strange and unforeseen ways. To this day the work carries on. Across the country, there are many communities that continue to live out a non-violent witness against the powers that kill and oppress the poor. Their steadfast commitment is bolstered when they can articulate why they live it every day. It is a commitment that is based not just on Scriptures, but also on the words of those great thinkers that critiqued the technique

of the modern era: Ellul and Stringfellow. And it all began when Merton, the Berrigans, and the other "gods" came down from "Mt. Olympus" to engage in the work of protest. Ω

Sandi Huckaby is a former LACW community member and was a co-editor of the Agitator.

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if they hope to feed their families.

Studies have long shown that conversion of military production creates more jobs while manufacturing needed things like rail systems, solar or wind turbines.

It is ultimately a question about the soul of the nation — what does it say about us as a people when we have to kill people around the world in order to put food on the table back home? Ω

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ment on our website). Why should taxpayers pick up this enormous cost and not get anything out of it except more nuclear naval warships, nuclear warheads, and dozens of aging, dangerous nuclear power plants, which have not come close to paying for themselves, not to forget the nuclear waste generated by the entire process? Predictably we did not get in; the gates clanged shut, and out came the camouflaged soldiers.

On another note, you would have thought I had kicked a hornet's nest when I flagged down an ice cream truck driver, who obligingly pulled into the entranceway of the base to sell us his tantalizing treats. Within moments a suitably irritated Mr. Smith assured him he would be towed away if he did not depart forthwith.

And so ended our adventures in Sin City and its environs. It is true we may not have changed the world (this time), but the powers that be know we, and others like us, who abhor the real weapons of terror and mass destruction, will be back and we will never give up. We will continue witnessing and demonstrating against the evils of nuclear bombs and missiles and drone murders. Perhaps next time you will join us. Ω

Faustino Cruz is a Los Angeles Catholic Worker community member.

THE WORKS OF MERCY:

Feed the hungry;
Clothe the naked; Give
drink to the thirsty;
Shelter the homeless;
Visit the imprisoned;
Care for the sick; Bury
the dead.

THE WORKS OF WAR:

Destroy crops; Seize
food supplies;
Contaminate water;
Destroy homes; Scatter
families; Imprison
dissenters; Inflict
wounds and burns;
Kill the living.