

Daniel Berrigan: Sword of wisdom, maker of peace

By [Jim Friedrich](#)

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There is no peace because there are no peacemakers. There are no makers of peace because the making of peace is at least as costly as the making of war—at least as exigent, at least as disruptive, at least as liable to bring disgrace and prison and death in its wake. —Daniel Berrigan, S.J., No Bars to Manhood

On May 17, 1968, nine Roman Catholic activists broke into a draft board office in Catonsville, Maryland, transferring 378 files to the parking lot to be incinerated with home-made napalm. As the fire burned, the “Catonsville Nine” prayed for peace. They were arrested, tried and sentenced to prison, but four of them, including two priests—Daniel and Philip Berrigan—went underground, eluding capture for a number of months, occasionally surfacing to speak at antiwar rallies.

At one of these public appearances, following a dramatic tableau of the Last Supper with giant puppets, Dan Berrigan made his escape inside one of the apostles. “I was hoping it wasn’t the puppet of Judas,” he said later. His comical getaway affirmed irrepressible life even as it mocked the powers of death. Berrigan, a puckish and playful spirit, knew that laughter could be a serious form of subversion.

After being sheltered by 37 different families, Dan Berrigan was finally captured August 11, 1970, in the house of Episcopal lawyer and theologian William Stringfellow. He was reading *Plato’s The Trial and Death of Socrates* when FBI agents showed up at the door.

On Palm Sunday of the following year, I designed a liturgy where two carpenters constructed a large cross near the altar during the course of the ritual. At various points, dialogue between the carpenters would interrupt the liturgical texts. The two workers expressed curiosity about the intended victim and the nature of his crime. They wondered about the morality of their own complicity in the official machinery of death. What if they just stopped making crosses? Would it make any difference? Or would they just find themselves without a job? In the end, they suppressed their doubts and finished the cross, hammering it together loudly during the eucharistic

prayer: *This is my body, given for you ... This is my blood, shed for you ...*

It was no coincidence that I had just been reading *No Bars to Manhood*, Dan Berrigan's compelling account of the influences and experiences underlying his Christian activism. Its conclusions were clear: as witnesses to the resurrection, the friends of God must say no to death. No more cross-building. No more remaining passive spectators at the world's crucifixions. "There are times so evil," he wrote, "that the first and indeed the only genuinely prophetic function is to cast down the images of injustice and death that claim [the human being] as victim."

A *Newsweek* blurb on my well-worn 95-cent paperback from 1971 reads, "Daniel Berrigan is the sort of priest who causes the lights of the Vatican to burn through the night." The actions he took and the company he kept often strained the patience and understanding of his clerical superiors. One of his friends in the Society of Jesus told him, "Do you want to know why you're in trouble so frequently? It's because you and some others show us what Jesuits can be. And that's why we can't stand you."

Today, when so many horrors are cloaked in euphemisms like "collateral damage," Dan Berrigan's truthful language still delivers a shock. His response to the charge of incinerating draft board records is justly famous:

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. For we are sick at heart, our hearts give us no rest from thinking of the Land of Burning Children ... We have chosen to say with the gift of our liberty, if necessary our lives: the violence stops here. The death stops here. The suppression of the truth stops here. This war stops here.

Even in his contentious moments with the church, Berrigan understood his priesthood to be deeply rooted in the ethos of his religious community, where, he wrote, one's life might "be purified of the inhuman drives of egoism, acculturation, professional pride, and dread of life." In the trial of the Catonsville Nine, when asked whether such radical protest was in harmony with Catholic teaching, he replied, "May I say that if that is not accepted as a substantial part of my action, then the action is eviscerated of all meaning and I should be committed for insanity."

For those of us who tend to play it safe in conforming our own choices to the gospel, Berrigan's life of witness poses hard questions about discipleship and the imperatives of conscience. He once described "an Indian holy man" with whom he led a retreat this way: "He was dangerous, as holiness should be; he was a sword of wisdom." The description also seems aptly applied to Berrigan himself. A college student, after hearing Berrigan speak at Stanford in the late '60s, put it this way: "Father Berrigan has raised the ante for all of us."

That student's religion professor, Robert McAfee Brown (one of my own most admired teachers), considered the question of whether the Berrigan brothers were signs or models. Their words and actions clearly signified the world's sin and brokenness in parabolic gestures difficult to ignore. But were we obligated to model our lives after theirs, or might we find other ways to be faithful, according to our own distinctive calling? This question has troubled many consciences, including my own.

"We must continually ask ourselves why we are so attracted to them," Brown wrote. "When we hear what they say and yet do not do the things they do ... their actions provide a disturbing sign that we must take seriously, particularly if those actions are not yet the model most of us are prepared to imitate." Brown himself had the courage to live into those questions for the rest of his life, becoming one of the most eloquent theological voices for justice and peace.

As "the man who hears handcuffs close upon him," Berrigan felt a deep kinship with biblical prisoners for God like the prophet Jeremiah. "There is a meaning to things, however dark and damaging ... Jeremiah wrestles with the meaning; his wrestling *is* the meaning; it defines the moral substance and limits of his activity in the world. At the same time, his struggle with the unknown One interiorizes, draws to a fine point and gravity his moral life."

Like Jeremiah, Berrigan knew a God who contends with human injustice, who plucks up and breaks down our tainted and presumptuous projects:

We are so used to an acculturated and childish religion, whose ethos has joined forces with the society—with its militarism and racism and fear of life, that we are almost illiterate before a document such as Jeremiah's. Can it be true that God is not a Niagara of pabulum, spilling His childish comfort upon the morally and humanly neutral, whose faces are raised blankly to partake of that infantile nourishment?

Not every Christian received his rhetoric gladly. And the radical priest's liturgical fusion of sacrament and protest also drew fire. After baptizing a baby in the chapel at Cornell, he kissed the new Christian's forehead and invited him "out of the world of war and destruction." While presiding at an "Electric Mass for Peace" on the same campus, he made explicit connections in the eucharistic prayer between Christ's blood and the blood shed on both sides in Vietnam. Some saw these things as careless, even blasphemous. Others found them prophetic and profoundly faithful.

Berrigan's words and actions had a deep and lasting influence on many in the antiwar and anti-nuclear movements, as well as progressive Christians. His dramatic forms of witness also drew immense media attention, for which he took some criticism as a "media freak." But his vocation was stronger than the temptations of celebrity. As Paul Elie, chronicler of the great 20th-century Catholic writers, [noted in a New Yorker blog post](#):

He created no foundation, nonprofit, or NGO; headed no pacifist think tank or Jesuit school of advanced study; gave no TED talk; engaged in no stagey dialogues offering equal time to the military point of view; and never reframed the ideals of nonviolence in any pocket-size manual for personal growth.

Berrigan had no neutral gear. Even when the public spotlight moved on to other subjects, his writing lost nothing of its urgency and fire. In *The Discipline of the Mountain*, his poetic reflection on "Dante's *Purgatorio* in a Nuclear World," he wrote, "There is a hell for those who go too far, and there is a hell, or at least an anteroom of hell, for those who refuse to go far enough." Going *far enough* for the sake of the gospel was the driving force of his life. But as he once confessed to Robert Coles, "We are groping. We shouldn't be sure of ourselves, because we can't be, not now—not ever."

Only death is sure, and that [finally came last week](#), on Orthodox Holy Saturday, to Daniel Berrigan, S.J., in his 95th year. I barely knew him, hearing him preach twice and breaking bread with him once in a Los Angeles rectory. But this loss feels personal. He was both sign and model for many priests of my generation, and there are things he said which haunt me still.

In 1964, midway in his life's journey, Berrigan [imagined the moment of his own death in a poem](#).

And then what? Only faith can say, that Easter faith which alone can contain and complete the fullness of human life. At the end of his meditation on Dante's *Purgatorio*, the poet-priest peers beyond death's horizon to see a resurrected humanity being gathered into God.

Leading the way are "the intractable ones" who have suffered prison, torture, and martyrdom for their faithful witness. In them we see at last "the human venture vindicated." Their faces and Christ's face become as one, in an upward gaze that "breaks the glacial will of God."

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