

Catholic activist Patrick O'Neill reports to prison, takes up new cause

by [Yonat Shimron](#) in the [February 10, 2021](#) issue



(RNS Photo / Yonat Shimron)

On January 14, Patrick O'Neill reported to the Federal Correctional Institution near Elkton, Ohio, to serve a 14-month sentence for breaking into a nuclear submarine base as part of a symbolic nuclear disarmament action he took with six other Catholic pacifists more than two years ago.

On his way to prison, O'Neill took up a new cause: protecting inmates from COVID-19.

Some 343,008 prisoners across the United States have tested positive for the coronavirus, and about 2,144 have died, according to the Marshall Project, an online

journalism organization focused on criminal justice.

Prison facilities are often overcrowded and poorly ventilated, making it nearly impossible to practice social distancing and other preventative measures to avoid contagion.

O'Neill, who is 64 and runs a Catholic Worker house near Raleigh, North Carolina, is part of the Kings Bay Plowshares 7. The group was found guilty last year of destroying government property at the Kings Bay naval base in Georgia, where the Catholic pacifists poured blood on a navy wall insignia, spray-painted antiwar slogans on a walkway, and banged on a monument to nuclear warfare.

O'Neill asked US District Court judge Lisa Godbey Wood to delay his sentence until he is vaccinated for COVID-19, but she denied the motion. Several others of the Plowshares group are already serving prison sentences.

Before reporting to prison, O'Neill participated in a 58-day vigil to demand that North Carolina governor Roy Cooper use his clemency powers to reduce the state's prison population to prevent the further spread of COVID-19 in the prisons. A runner, O'Neill did 150 laps around the governor's mansion and gave a testimonial.

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