



A Spirituality of Political *Kenosis*

By *Eric Martin*

AFTER FR. DAN Berrigan passed away on April 30, 2016, hundreds of people whose lives he touched went marching through the heavy rain from Maryhouse Catholic Worker in Manhattan to The Church of St. Francis Xavier for his funeral Mass. We stopped on the church steps to sing in jubilation, “I’m gonna lay down my sword and shield, down by the riverside, ain’t gonna study war no more!” Much was said as half the people in the pews sat dripping on the other half, who drove or took the subway. Most memorable to me was the message from his sister-in-law, Liz McAlister, who had for years organized, witnessed, gone to jail, and prayed with the Jesuit priest-poet. “Sisters and brothers, it is of no service to Dan or to his memory for us to simply hold him up as an icon, especially in ways that exempt us from responsibility,” she proclaimed. “How much

better would it be if we asked for a double portion of Dan's spirit, and better yet, if we acted on it?"¹

Understanding what "a double portion of Dan's spirit" means typically starts by turning to May 17, 1968, when he joined eight other Catholics in stuffing Vietnam War draft files in a trash bin and setting them aflame with napalm, reciting the Lord's Prayer over the pyre with his priestly collar visible before the news cameras. The group was known as the Catonsville Nine and became a symbol for the meeting point of the mystical and the political in a moment of heightened cultural violence. For years, he irked both Christians (including several superiors in his Jesuit order), who viewed the role of religion to be more or less confined to personal prayer and church services, and activists working for social justice without the baggage of religion (such as the Weathermen). However, for many, he and those with whom he worked had resurfaced an ancient truth in new garb. Like the prophets of scripture, Berrigan grasped that personal faith cannot be severed from the life of the *polis*, and he decried any attempt by his church to pretend otherwise.

Berrigan was born in 1921. His father's union organizing and his mother's hospitality to those hit hardest by the Depression roused the young boy's political consciousness. Yet, if he had any explicit links to make between his religious vocation and social engagement as a young priest, it was in the precise manner he would later condemn. In 1943, while in the early stages of his Jesuit formation, he wrote to his brother Phil, who was fighting in World War II, that perhaps "our Lord wants you as surely in a field Artillery or Air Force just as surely as he wants fifteen years of study and sweat from me." God, after all, is "Him Who was a good Soldier."² Eleven years later, in his final year of formation, he proudly became a military chaplain at Kaiserslautern, America's largest military base outside US soil, where he gave sermons in the shadow of atomic artillery. It was the kind of theological justification and ministerial enablement of patriotic killing that he dedicated the last fifty years of his life to uprooting.

The "Dan Berrigan" remembered in the history books is the result of a long, arduous, and complex conversion. One pivotal moment on this pilgrimage of understanding priestly vocation was a trip to France in 1953–1954. It was there that he met the controversial worker-priests, who had grown out of ecclesial experiments in engaging Marxist laborers who had long been abandoning the church. These

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priests completely dropped their traditional ministerial duties of preaching in a parish and became, in essence, workers. They went to the factories alongside, worked with, dressed as, lived among, and struggled for unionization with ordinary people. Berrigan was fascinated with this creative presence, so foreign to his training, and felt enlivened by their talks, given in plainclothes to the young novices. He wrote home that he hoped they flourished for the next century: “There are few other signs as hopeful as these in the heavens. Keep them in your prayers.”³

The pope shut down their ministry only months later, and Berrigan’s own superior and retreat master was summoned by Rome for questioning. The example of these priests testing new boundaries, and their official rejection, seems to constitute the first significant challenge to Berrigan’s comfortable understanding of both his role as a priest and the church’s role in the world. It seemed to him that the worker-priest experiment, as a reaction to Marxism’s allure in France, was just the right direction for the church—a way for it to go to the people where they were, rather than a demand for people to come to it. That some of their members had been arrested in a peace protest when an American general came to France must have struck Berrigan as alien, yet it anticipates his later vocation. During his trip to Germany as a military chaplain, however, his maturation was only at its beginning point.

He also traveled around Europe and saw the brutal signs of World War II everywhere, from struggling economies to craters in the earth. In his letters, he noted with admiration the newfound celebrity of Abbé Pierre (1912–2007), who stirred the national consciousness to address rampant homelessness in France. In 1954, when he returned to America to teach high school in New York, he met Dorothy Day (1897–1980) and the Catholic Workers, who had developed a trenchant

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religious critique of the standing political and economic systems. Though the *Catholic Worker* newspaper was a constant presence in his household growing up, it was through bringing his students to serve at their houses of hospitality during this time that he would meet its co-founder and be changed indelibly by her witness.

He had come at the precise moment that Day and the movement around her were taking a visible political stance against nuclear weapons and war. In 1955, New York began air-raid drills in preparation for a possible Soviet nuclear attack against America. When the signal was given, everyone in the city was to huddle in subway stations and other shelters. Ammon Hennacy (1893–1970), the self-proclaimed “one-man revolution,” brought this to Day’s attention and suggested resisting. Being no stranger to jail, she immediately agreed. They placed themselves in the park across the street from City Hall and carried leaflets that read, “We do not have faith in God if we depend upon the Atom Bomb.” For seven years they protested, and again Berrigan had in front of him a group of people with deep faith, immersing themselves in the political realities of the time, facing arrest for protesting war.

But Day’s witness was not limited to public displays and going to jail. Central to the Catholic Worker movement were its houses of hospitality. In New York, they had been taking in the homeless and hungry since 1933 to feed, shelter, and care for them in a direct and human way that no corporate or state bureaucracy ever could. Day had put into practice the vision of Matthew 25, performing the works of mercy and seeing Christ in those who were hungry, thirsty, in need of food, in prison, or dying. It was a form of ministry not at all unlike that of the worker-priests: Forsaking traditional methods to join the

neglected where they were and living among them without privilege. Like the worker-priests, Day's deepest religious self could only be expressed in the bi-directional spirituality of divinizing the victims of what she called "this filthy rotten system" by acting upon their humanity and protesting the military, state, and economic apparatus that inevitably dehumanized the least of these.

In the witness of both the worker-priests and the Catholic Worker, Berrigan encountered a discipleship of political *kenosis*. Their approach to social evils was not to devise a more genius system or create a committee to handle problems. Rather, they emptied themselves in prayerful community to directly serve those before them, placing themselves on the same level. They did not call for the overthrow of the government, but for prophetic denunciation, repentance, and conversion. Seeking a "revolution of the heart," as Day called it, they differed from other revolutionaries of the century like Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924) and Fidel Castro (1926–2016). Rather than kill to attain power, they worked to relinquish the little they had—Day emptying herself of a college education and marriage, the worker-priests giving up their traditional ministry and its comforts. They sought

to be one with [people], to be incarnated in their lives; to be workers with the workers, peasants with the peasants; to share their joys, struggles, troubles, and prayers; to unite contemplation and action by vivifying both; to rediscover the sacred meaning of all things, and make the whole of human life the road which leads to [God].⁴

Berrigan still had a long path to walk from 1961 to Catonsville in 1968. He would march in Selma with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968) and attend his famous "I Have A Dream" speech in 1963, travel to South Africa to preach against apartheid with the women of the Grail, go behind the Iron Curtain to discover life under Communist rule, be exiled by his order to Latin America while poor communities were empowering themselves through an emerging theology of liberation, and fly to Hanoi with the historian Howard Zinn (1922–2010) to collect three American prisoners of war and experience life in a bomb shelter under the weaponry of the US military. But it was the example of the worker-priests and Catholic Workers that gave him his footing through it all. He would adopt their spirituality

of political *kenosis* in his own way, opting to join those in prison, not as a chaplain or visitor, but as one of them.

As Dorothy Day described with her own conversion, Berrigan took “the downward path to salvation,”⁵ becoming a fool for Christ who took upon himself a poverty of freedom as an antidote to the political and economic systems that declared the lives of Vietnamese villagers expendable. His primary resources for half a century were the Beatitudes and Matthew 25, where Jesus self-identifies with the least of these. The worker-priests and Catholic Workers were the first to reveal to him what creative manifestation that might take in the contemporary political milieu.

So, when Liz McAlister proclaimed at Berrigan’s funeral that the world needed a “double portion of Dan’s spirit,” she emphasized that his legacy was not meant to be petrified in an icon. That is certainly not how he saw the worker-priests or Dorothy Day. Rather, he places before us a responsibility to interpret the Gospels with our heads and our hearts—but also our feet and our hands, even if they end up in chains. In the present moment, with its heightened need for spiritual and contemplative attention to political and economic levers, his turn to engaged *kenosis* instead of marshaling power for this or that leader is worthy of attention. It is one way to meet our communal dread with hope.

Luckily, Berrigan left Zen-like blueprints for navigating this downward path in a 1979 interview, when he was asked about plans for the future. “It’s no different than the past,” he replied. “Opportunity for more growth, and more prayer, and more salvation.” But, interjected the interviewer, what about political plans? “That’s the political plan,” he said. Was he sure? “Absolutely.”⁶ ♦