

FROM THE UNDERGROUND #1
Daniel Berrigan, S.J.

1970
piece by
radical
priest
Dan Berrigan

On April 21 at 5:30 in the afternoon in New York City, my brother Philip and another war resister were dragged from a Catholic priests' residence by agents of the F.B.I.. Thus, abruptly, the two began serving Federal prison sentences (of 6 and 3 years respectively) for destruction of draft records.

Eight catholics, including Philip and myself, have been sought by Federal authorities since April 9, the date set for our surrender. That surrender was considered practically a foregone conclusion. Were not three clerics involved? And even if clerics, in a passing fit of aberration, had once chosen to disobey the law, would they not now choose to repair their crimes with due promptitude? Indeed was not the Catholic church to which they professed adherence, the greatest single supportive force of the Vietnam war, outside the government itself?

Indeed yes. The government was so sure of its prey that it even let us know some days before our surrender date that its justice would be tempered by mercy. Once we were safely behind bars, a hearing on reduction of our sentence would be held; the outcome, it could be expected, would be benign. Thus the whip and the carrot, in judicious combination, were to keep our skittish spirits pacified.

But on April 21, in New York, that plan was formally abandoned as useless. No more threats, no more rewards. Some 100 Federal agents invaded the rectory of St. Gregory's church, battered down doors and led the two resisters away. The police widened the cast of the net to include a Catholic convent in the same area. For two successive days, they entered and searched every corner in pursuit of your correspondent. Obviously, they did not come upon him.

This happy phenomenon may bear some reflection: how is it that having chosen to break a law and thereby presumably suffer the consequences, one is led further into an obscure twilight existence, neither prison nor freedom, somewhere between crime and punishment? Is it realistic in such a nation as ours, where revolutionary rhetoric is common and revolutionary conditions have by no means coalesced (even in the case of black Panthers) that a white cleric, sprung from a culturally stifled church, unfailingly obedient to Caesar, should now hear a different drummer, and fall in? Is the term "underground" as applied to the American instance, a will o' the wisp? What, in America, differentiates the moral witness of a jailed man (like my brother) from an invisible man (like me)? What can actually and usefully be done now, in my circumstances, for the peace movement?

There is a mythology abroad in our country, sedulously fostered by liberals and blessed in a remarkably superficial way by a former Supreme Court Justice. It has to do with the moral necessity of joining illegal action to legal consequence. One who acts against the law, if he is to act virtuously and responsibly, must always take the consequences; otherwise, his act is necessarily tainted in the eyes of good men.

The principle obviously is of interest to those in power. It is a more or less conscious vindication of the social, political and indeed religious status quo. It aims with vigor at the maintenance of law and order in whatever sector, in order to bring even the most passionate conscience under control of unchangeable, presumably beneficent public authority.

If good men, acting in bad times on behalf of serious change in the very nature and function of public authority can be so coerced, it is quite clear that an impassible limit has been established. Ethical men may, in such a way, even become a powerful support to an evil regime. In paying tribute to the courts, the law, the penal system, they become witnesses to the validity of the structures they seek to confront. Jails, law courts, police, and the social arrangements which depend upon their smooth functioning proceed on schedule to isolate and stifle dissent. The last state of things thus becomes worse than the first.

It was presumed two years ago that the Catonsville resisters would play their appointed role faithfully, as indeed for some time we did. We remained in peace after our action, and submitted to arrest. We engaged lawyers, faced the courts, prepared our defense, conscious that the outcome of our case was pre-ordained by rigorous secular gods both Calvinist and Caesarian in nature. In due process "guilty" was the verdict returned against us. The charade of appeals went forward; we were free on bail; free, that is to a point. By court order, there could be no public speech that touched on specific areas of illegal, even though non-violent, action. Indeed, in an excess of zeal which the courts never thought seriously to enforce, I was forbidden to preach — it being thought, in view of my felonious proclivities, that I could only offer an inflammatory gloss on essentially harmless texts.

I am led to reflect, at this point, how the worst social impasses only serve to build up the forces of men's mind and heart for a cataclysmic breakthrough. At least in some cases. In many others, perhaps in the majority, a kind of diffusion of energy, a regressive tolerance builds up, compounded of illusion and hopelessness. One lives with cancer even while it grows internally — as long as we can hang on to the small chance that it is not terminal. So with a certain kind of liberal hope — extinguished by the Kennedy downfall, flaring briefly under the words of McCarthy, at length adjusted to Nixon. For such an ethos to make do, not only must Black aspirations suffer "benign neglect" but any movement of the spirit that seriously challenges a rotting social system will be treated to a heavy dosage of like euphemisms.

But we of Catonsville were cursed or blessed; in any case our readings of the time were different, as were our readings of what religion required of us. What are presumably virtuous men to do when two years after they have staked their lives on the sanity of their fellowmen, insanity still prevails? To some of us, one thing at least seemed clear. We could by no means presume that the crime - trial - punishment sequence must remain intact simply because two years ago it made sense. Something else might be required; the Vietnam War was more violent and widespread than ever; the march of power proceeded with unexampled boldness, straight on toward foreign and domestic disaster. More victims were dying, wider areas were devastated, the nation was caught, shamed, and traumatized, in the trap which itself had fabricated and sprung. More, the hopes of the early peace movement were wasted by attrition and false promises, within and without; the large scale reinforcements of resisters from student ranks, workers, blacks, middle-class, failed to appear. We of Catonsville were some years older, and as tired as anyone else; yet the next moves were still up to us. Or so it seemed, and seems.

Some of us decided to continue resistance, to refuse jail. For how long, we do not know. With what effect, we do not know. Whether we can create in the breach a network of responsibility and support which will allow us to move about, to be heard on occasion, to meet the press, to write and publish, remains to be seen. Everything has literally to be created from whole cloth, to be improvised. We shall have to try, at least.

For white Americans like ourselves, an attempt to create an underground presence which will be non-violent and politically audible is indeed a chancy one. We are neither Black Panthers, Frenchmen over Vichy, the German confessing church in the '30's, Algerians under occupation, members of the N.L.F.. It would be disastrous to apply to our situation the realities of colonialism or occupation; and any analogies between ourselves and the third world, or ourselves and historic minorities in our own country must be explored with extreme reserve.

At the same time, analogies are not to be despised. Our government is not merely courting disaster in its irresponsible war abroad, it is setting face more and more firmly against peaceable change as long as that change threatens the status quo. Such a political atmosphere, if pushed far enough, favors the change it so dreads; it bursts the pods of discontent, resistance and violence, and scatters the seed far and wide. A profound and widespread sense of fraternity is created across time and distance, between disenchanted Americans and the suppressed masses of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. How long can the raw energy of violated, enraged men be stemmed at home, when it draws its vitality from all sides, even from the very forces that seek to suffocate it? No one can say, least of all those who control, for the present, the course of public authority and the exercise of power.

Perhaps in such times, one had best place consideration of purely political gain firmly aside. The odds are simply too great against us to be able to measure our actions solely or primarily against such a scale. If this is so, and I think it may be so, another far more mysterious criterion of action must be involved. It is simply the "suffering fidelity" of which Bonhoeffer wrote in Hitler's Germany. One takes the onslaught trusting to the rightness of his course of action, determined upon so simple a thing as being a man. Such may, in the long run, be the only useful course for now. Moving anonymously about the country, speaking and meeting with small groups of friends, encouraging an analysis of our lives, our structures, where a breakthrough may be possible; and perhaps above all showing that such a course is practically (and psychologically) possible — in such a way the myth of omnipotence of the "system" is punctured in one small instance. The alternatives are widened, at least, in one case.

To men and women of the third world, the above must seem a minimal program indeed. Could not Americans, skilled as they presumably are in every technical field from the micro world to the stars, also construct fabulous and imaginative methods of resistance? Does not Dewey's famous principle of "transfer of knowledge" come into play here?

The questions by implication fail to take into account several realities. The first has to do with the nature of political resistance, which cannot by any means be equated with technique. Indeed technical competence, exercised in an atmosphere of cold war competitiveness, consumer economics, and progressive militarization, is quickly evacuated of the interest due to truly historical events. We are left with very little — the vulgarizing of human instinct, junkers in political seats of power, distraction as a way of life, raucous appeals to trivialities and

luxuries, the consumer cornucopia pouring out its vast retail heap of polluting junk. Most people are swept under by this stream of "goods and services;" they are pressurized and processed and finally anesthetized against moral choice or movement. Even the student resisters, for whom the war was the occasion of a profound revulsion against national absurdity, are shaken as to the future; where there is so much to hate, the task of finding something to love is Herculean indeed.

And yet we think this must be a definition of human movement; the task of finding, in the urban dump yard of our civilization, some clue, some sign, of the presence of man; what direction to take, whom to join with, how to release in a celebrational and useful way these spiritual energies at our command.

At our command, and yet not yet. The American psyche cannot become the fraternal instrument of world change until it has undergone its dark night of the soul. I do not mean this statement to be mystifying or abstract. Quite the contrary. I mean something quite simple; Americans have not only been alienated from world spiritual developments by runaway technology; they have been a vast alienated force in most of the western world. Moreover, in the third world, the vicious circle in which they are caught at home (the engineering of an inhuman future) has widened into a system of military and economic control and repression. Spiritually isolated from the strivings of men everywhere for justice, decency and the goods of the spirit, America could only export those dark obsessions which go by the most euphemistic and deceptive of phrases: the American way of life.

The breaking of this iron ring will be accomplished only by the shrewdest blows, repeatedly struck, until the weak points at the circle are broken and American themselves are free to join the fraternity of man.

As I write this, newspapers are filled with the account of the celebration of "Earth Day" in America. The news is to our point; blows struck in midair, accomplishing nothing. While America continues fervently to pollute and destroy the environment of millions of helpless people abroad, and expands her Eastern war into Laos and Cambodia, a nervous call goes forth to "save our country's environment." A more absurd deflection of true purpose could hardly be imagined.

Right thinking! An issue is genuine only when it is organically in relation to every other issue; in this case, to the impact of militarized consumer-technology on the fate of man. But to the vast majority of Americans, discouraged by the inadequate political gestures of the past years, and desperately seeking some ground to stand on, the "Earthday" was a sunny and simple hour of relief from the cruel winter solstice of their discontent. Any issue is better than none. The war in Vietnam, which was once Kennedy's war, and then Johnson's war, is now Nixon's war. That it has been from the start, and on their own soil, and in their own burned and violated flesh, the war of the Vietnamese peasants, and that bombs and napalm now fall indiscriminately on the flesh of Laotians and Cambodians, is beside the point. A fact too large for ingesting, too hot for political resistance, simply beyond adequate coping.

Ultimately, beyond coping, since it requires too strange a measure of those qualities which can only flourish when a people have become conscious of their own human losses and begin to create the tools of human gain. Simply, we have not lost enough, or suffered enough, or grown conscious. We lack as a consequence community, imagination, fervor, right thinking, compassion, courage, hope ingenuity. For the present, "in order to be healed, our illness must get worse."