

Father Daniel Berrigan: Catonsville Nine

(Originally edited by Andrew Lutsky and edited for the classroom by Cari Ladd. The longer interview is available at: http://www.pbs.org/pov/disturbingtheuniverse/interview_berrigan.php)

1. The Action

In May of '68 we entered a draft board in this little town called Catonsville, in Maryland, and we took out about 160 A-1 files [draft files], we took them out of the building, downstairs, because we didn't want to risk a fire in the building, and we hustled them into a parking lot nearby—they had these big trash baskets-- and threw them in and set them on fire with homemade napalm. We had found the recipe for napalm in a special service handbook in the library at Georgetown University. None of us knew anything about napalm except that it had been used on people, especially on children. We thought that would be a proper symbol of the war as ethical outrage, that we would use this on documents that justified murder instead of on people, that that might speak to the public about this war. So the night before we had a kind of a liturgical service, we concocted napalm at the home of a friend in Baltimore and we mixed that and prayed over it, and prayed that this might be an instrument of peacemaking, as it was an instrument certainly of us taking our lives into our hands. And, uh, so we threw that over the huge bundle of papers and it whooshed up tellingly, and we joined hands around the fire and recited the Lord's prayer, and waited for Armageddon.

Oh, they called the police of course, who arrived shortly and were astonished at these priests and people, and put the fire out and hustled us into the wagon. I think in the town they didn't have any lock-up so they used the back room of a library and locked us in, and of course we were in a great state of relief. And then this big guy, I still can see the scene, appeared at the doorway, obviously in charge, you know, FBI, and he looked around the room and saw my brother, Philip, and he had been involved in Philip's case in '67 for pouring blood on draft files in Baltimore City. So he looked around the room and he bellowed out, "Berrigan again!" And then he yelled, "I'm leaving the Catholic church." [Laughs.] So I said to Philip, "That's the best thing you did all day-- get him out!"

Did you know that you would be arrested?

Oh, sure, we knew we were going to be arrested, and we knew the chances were very large that we would spend several years in prison. That had to be spelled out, that had to be part of the preparation for this action, you know, so that people didn't go into it blindfolded, or with some sort of utopian idea that we're going to get away with this, which was ridiculous, infantile. So part of the building of the trust ahead of time was to take a close look at family obligations, at your professional life, at your bible, at your friendships, at your ability, as far as you can gauge it, to go into something that's going to cost you, maybe years of your life. Well, that note of realism I think was very, very important. And some people were mature enough to say, "Okay, I can swallow, even though dry, and I can walk with you, even going to the unknown." And then other people bowed out, which was a good thing to do also.

2. The Trial

Let me say something about the intention we had in the trial, which of course had to be dramatized in our style and in our rhetoric and our personal convictions, and so on and so forth. I think we had pretty well agreed ahead of time that going for acquittal was tactically hopeless, and wasn't really speaking for our passion in going into Catonsville. The judge was always intervening, he played it very soft as the trial went on, because he knew he had the last word. But he was saying things to us like, "Well, if you had taken five or ten of those draft files and burned them symbolically, you wouldn't be in this trouble now. But," he said, "you did

something very serious.” And we said, “Yes, and we understand it was serious.” We couldn’t really be impressed by a symbol that was not serious, and five or ten draft files as a symbol was not serious. So we took out 165, and that was worth three years, as we well know.

I tried in my statement before the court, I tried to speak about the criminality of burning papers instead of children. And that’s one way of putting our argument. We were calling these A-1 files ‘hunting licenses against humans,’ and we were saying if you carry this document, it’s open season on children and the aged and the ill and all sorts of people. And you could be given a medal for it, you certainly won’t be tried criminally for it. So we were trying to unlatch some of these myths that were protecting, in our way of thinking, were protecting mass murder. And putting it that way, that this napalm burned papers instead of children, was deliberately shocking and deliberately, as I felt, true. Why not put it that way, put it boldly?

We frequently invoked, because all of us were people of religious faith, we frequently invoked the Sermon on the Mount. And, uh, what is one to make in wartime of this plain stipulation of Jesus, “Love your enemies,” or of a statement to Peter, “Put up your sword, those who live by the sword will die by the sword,” or his words at the Last Supper, “This is my body given for you,” not, “This is your body destroyed by me,” and so on, and so on, and so on. I mean, we have so much evidence that the burning of papers instead of children was a Christian act, a religious act, that war is constantly closing the book and saying it doesn’t apply. “We’re at war, hate your enemies.” “We’re at war-- kill them!” As at present, and as during Vietnam. So, we were trying to keep the book open, and say, “No, we think he meant it, we think he meant it or he wouldn’t have said it. Love your enemies. Don’t kill, for any reason.”

I felt that we had conducted ourselves, the eight defendants had conducted themselves honorably, had not betrayed our convictions, had told about all sorts of service in the third world that brought us to say no to this war, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. And, uh, it was emotionally a draining week and a very difficult one, but at the same time I felt we couldn’t really have done better, Bill couldn’t have done better on our behalf, and the outcome was a foregone conclusion before we started. We knew we were going to be convicted, that’s why we didn’t waste time with the jury, all sorts of things like that. But I was comparing it ... in my own heart I was comparing that day to a kind of birthday. I felt reborn. I felt that I had done what I had been born for, and I think the others did, too.