

RELIGIOUS

DANIEL BERRIGAN, S.J.

Philip Berrigan's book *No More Strangers*, which deals with racial strife, war and the effects of poverty, carries the dedication:

"To my brother, Father Dan, S.J., without whom neither my priesthood nor this book would be possible."

This is only one testimony to the kind of influence Father Daniel Berrigan can have, and since it is offered by his younger brother, probably not remarkable. But as I talked to people in the peace movement and his name kept cropping up, it was evident that he had an influence on many, and many different kinds of, people. One was as likely to hear of him standing with Norman Thomas or Dr. Spock on a platform in Washington protesting U.S. policy in Vietnam as leading a peace vigil the U.N. or giving a talk to some student group in the Midwest. He seems ubiquitous and, if current fashion has not pulverized the term out of meaningful existence, he has Daniel Berrigan is a poet, essayist and theologian and presently editor of *Jesuit Missions* magazine. He entered the Jesuits in 1939 and was ordained in 1952. He has studied at the Gregorian Institute in Rome and in France, where he also did parish work. His poetry and prose have appeared in a number of magazines such as *The Atlantic*, *Poetry*, *Saturday Review* and *Commonweal*. He has published three volumes of essays and five of poetry. His poetry is favorably regarded by a number

of poets, including Marianne Moore who has said that she reads "with reverence anything that Father Berrigan writes." Father Berrigan is an engaged person and his multiple activities have caused him to be described as "a leading voice of dissent in this country." At one point, apparently, that voice

impinged upon the ears of his superiors in a way they found unpleasant. The official story reads that their displeasure had nothing to do with his withdrawal from the national debate, that Daniel Berrigan was sent to Latin America as a part of a normal journalistic assignment. That story failed to convince a number of people who thought that he was being penalized for his activities in the Clergy Concerned about Vietnam. Students demonstrated outside Cardinal Spellman's office in New York, and over a thousand priests and laymen signed an advertisement which appeared in the *New York Times* demanding his return. When he returned he took up his activities where he had left them.

It is a number of months after this that I visit Daniel Berrigan in the Jesuit Missions House on the Upper East Side of New York. The housekeeper shows me from the cool, quiet, cavernous foyer into the waiting room. Berrigan comes in brisk and lively from the chill outdoors, but as he responds to my questions there is an air of reserve, of withdrawn inwardness, of self-communing, as if his statements were directed to himself as much as to me. His voice is low and intense with a slight quality.

His own position on the war in Vietnam is clear. He has publicly referred to "the immorality of our current effort in Vietnam," and has said that it fails to satisfy Thomistic requirements of a just war on three counts: (1) The United States has not explored every other means for a settlement; (2) United States forces have exceeded justifiable employment of force; they rely upon "torture of prisoners, execution without trial, defoliation of crops" and have practically erased the "crucial distinction between the nonviolent noncombatants and the guilty"; (3) We have not attended to the rights of self-determination of the entire Vietnamese people.*

Quotations are taken from an interview printed in the *National Catholic Reporter*, September, 8, 1965, p. 2.

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When I ask Daniel Berrigan what were the most important factors in the development of his judgments about war and peace today, he separates out from the many which he edges three that seem most crucial.

BERRIGAN: I think the first factor would be the civil rights movement. The light it shed upon, first of all, the human person himself, the new light it shed upon the creation of persons and the creation of community, the way this kind of new building of human life and the human person had to come about by way of the acceptance of suffering—I think that was -a kind of symbol of a universal attitude toward man, not just a national attitude toward a minority.

Then, I can remember, really to the day, when I read a certain article by [Thomas] Merton which landed in my brain like a bullet; it exploded there and really helped me very greatly to bridge the difficult gap between this national movement and an attitude of nonviolence toward man in general, man in the world. I remember being profoundly disturbed by the article and finally writing him, not really expecting an answer. But he did answer at some length and helped me to clarify what I had tried to say and suggested some reading and so on.

And then, thirdly, I would mark the influence of the worker priests, especially as they had gone through the Algerian experience and the French experience of colonialism and helped, I think, France understand herself as a post-colonial power. I think their contribution solidified my idea that perhaps we had accepted a kind of Marxist mystique without analyzing it, and that we ourselves were unconsciously and perhaps in a betraying sense dedicating our conscience to an ideal of warfare as inevitable.

FINN: We, meaning which people?

BERRIGAN: Christians, I would say. Especially, yes. And it was a great kind of purifying of my own mind just to see that men like that could be peaceable and sources of peace for not merely by talking but by the sort of life they had adopted.

FINN: Did your experiences in the civil rights movement have much to do with your own ideas about the uses of violence or nonviolence, or did you even think of your actions at that time in these particular terms?

BERRIGAN: Well, my own experience in civil rights began in the North, which is of course a limiting and very specific factor. Meantime, my brother Philip was operating in the deep and we were able, I think, to share a great deal, mainly along student lines. I guess I learned a great deal from the university students who were just beginning nonviolent methods in the freedom rides and the picketing and sit-ins, North and South. And without reflecting a great deal upon it, I think it had great impact on me.

FINN: Did you write to Merton specifically about issues in volving war, peace, violence?

BERRIGAN: As I recall it now, his article had mainly to do with the beginnings of his thesis that limited violence, strictly limited violence, was practically speaking impossible in a age, and that therefore the incursions of the United States into Latin America-I don't think Vietnam had really erupted then - that the economic and military adventuring of the United States abroad was indicative of something much deeper in a national malaise, a national kind of loss of spirit and of identity. He said that recourse to violence was an increasingly seductive temptation for us and, as a nuclear power, a particularly dangerous thing. And I remember being struck especially by his analysis of violence as an illness, because I had never really it put this way before.

Berrigan had mentioned Merton's analysis which suggested that recourse to violence is an illness. And I recall the *Pacem in Terris* Convocation of February 1965 at which statesmen, politicians, intellectuals and diplomats from twenty nations discussed and debated the way to peace. Only toward the end of the discussion did a participant touch on this question. "No one at the conference," Eugene Burdick said, "has addressed himself to the problem of whether the human animal is pacific. Does he want peace rather than war?"

More recently I had read a passage which impressed me sufficiently to clip it out. Reviewing *A Passionate Prodigality*, G. Chapman's memoirs of World War I, George Steiner wondered whether the noted scholar "was ever again as happy, as wholly alive, as he had been in the mud of Flanders." And Steiner goes on to speculate about the vision expressed in that book,

comparing it with Homer and Tolstoy. "It is a recognition," he writes, "both wry and zestful, of the fact that war matches certain rhythms inherent in man, that battle calls forth potentialities of nobility, of ingenuity, of endurance, left unrealized in the gray routine of ordinary life." I read the clipping to Berrigan and ask for his response.*

BERRIGAN: A quote like that, it seems to me, brings up a great deal of history that has to be confronted. An acceptance of this history, as a fact, you know-that neither the history of Western civilization nor the history of the Catholic Church is a history of nonviolence. You have this kind of marvelous landmark of the figure of Christ, and the imitation of Christ, and then a very early deflection away from that, sort of by-passing it on the part of actual history. So the quote you bring up, it seems to me, is part of an enormously powerful and persuasive folklore which I find almost totally imbedded in the consciousness of modern men. Warmaking is an honorable way of life. It's imbedded in all sorts of national history, in shrines and battle grounds. Perhaps the greatest symbol of it all is the vitality of the Pentagon itself and the thinking there. And I keep thinking, especially flying out of Washington, if only some day this incredible concentration of talent, resources, energy, could be applied to the making of peace. What a day!

But I think realistically, especially after this tour of Latin America, that we are *not* going to have an end to certain kinds

of limited warfare, at least in our lifetime. I don't see any real * The question has, of course, a long and still unfinished history. Quincy Wright in his monumental *A Study of War* cites various theories and mentions as oversimplified those attributing to man a primitive fighting instinct. He does, however, cite a minority of psychologists who hold this view and quotes one, G. W. Crile:

"Soldiers say that they find relief in any muscular action; but the supreme bliss of forgetfulness is in an orgy of lustful satisfying killing in a hand-to-hand bayonet action, when the grunted breath of the enemy is heard and his blood flows warm on the hand. . .

"As I reflected upon the intensive application of man to war in cold, rain, and mud; in rivers, canals, and lakes; under ground, in the air, and under the sea; infected with vermin, covered with scabs, adding the stench of his own filthy body to that of his decomposing comrades; hairy, begrimed, bedraggled, yet with unflagging zeal striving eagerly to kill his fellows; and as I felt within myself the mystical urge of the sound of great cannon I realized that war is a normal state of man. . .

The impulse to war . . . is stronger than the fear of death." Abridged edition. (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 320.

istic possibility of it. Nor do I clearly see the alternatives to it, and this is what makes me very tentative and qualified in my own pacifism. Because while I see clearly a Gospel ideal, I think we must also deal with our history and our times. And I talked down there to so many good *men* and revolutionary men, in the *best* sense, who themselves did not see a way out by means of nonviolence. This, of course, throws new light upon my own thinking, at the same time a new perplexity, you know.

FINN: You used the term pacifism about your own position, at the same time saying you didn't see any way out. Without unduly limiting or using too easy labels, can you describe what your pacifist position is? You said it's evolving—so maybe "position" is not even the right word?

BERMAN: Well, it's a sort of a stance that one is, I think, obliged almost continually to pause and reflect upon in the light of things that are bombarding his life so constantly. I wouldn't take a stand that is rigid and absolute out of a sense of responsibility. And I would like to see developed or perhaps like to work out for myself a little more clearly a morality that would try to start from the obligations that one senses, say to a person who is right at hand and who is under immediate and violent attack. It seems to me that one's responsibility to repel that is very evident.

My problem right now is to try to understand that in the context of society, especially in some of the countries of Latin America that are really suffocated by an oligarchy and where violence at least offers a very profound invitation. What are the responsibilities, say, to a revolutionary group—let's say Christian revolutionary group—in a country which sees two percent in control and ninety-eight percent permanently destroyed? And can we extrapolate the idea of our individual responsibility to one or two persons to the idea of our responsibility to a society, which might involve one in the necessity of repelling unjust violence against that society? I don't know. I don't know. But to me this is at least a valuable question right now.

And just to be practical I'm trying also to understand, mainly in the midst of our Vietnam impasse, what the role, say, of the nuclear powers would be in revolutionary situations which certainly are going to continue to confront us across two thirds of the world. And I would have to separate my thinking—again, just for myself—with regard to the kind of violence that a people

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needs in order to become itself within a deprived nation, and the kind of violence which is allowable to a nuclear power in its international dealings. And for myself I find these are two very separate questions.

FINN: You obviously have a position which rejects violence but nevertheless sees some conditions under which it may be the best alternative, at least in the minds of the people who are there presently involved. How do these various factors come together in your judgment of Vietnam?

BERRIGAN: Well, here we go with something very complex again. But I was very heartened by this morning's *Times* account of Senator Fulbright's speech, which I considered a very great speech, in New York here yesterday.* And the cause of

my rejoicing was not *solely* that this senator had so thoughtfully analyzed not merely our war but our national spirit, our kind of stance before the world community. More than that even, it was almost like a recognition scene, because I found gathered into one there so many of the threads that my brother and I have been trying to explore and to reflect on and to speak of in the last six months

But the biggest single debt that I could point to with regard to my own kind of moral conclusions on the war would really be the writings and the whole symbolic meaning of Pope John. I think that he gave me a kind of universe, an intellectual universe, to walk into where I was able to see this war in a non-obsessive way; to see it in its context of world need, world development, world hope, and then to see also, by way of ricochet almost, what I would call the betrayal of those things by this war adventuring. Almost as though we had allowed a kind of embolism to appear in the bloodstream and then really to form a serious blockage to this communication and communion contribution that is our world vocation right now as Americans.

I find public figures like Kennedy and Fulbright, and Morse to a lesser degree, being able to see more and more clearly not merely this point of no return at which escalation will perhaps, and perhaps even shortly, find itself, but also able to look at this larger picture of what the developing world hopes for from us, how these hopes are being disappointed. They see how an enormous percentage of world resources and brains and attention—psychological and spiritual attention which is really irre

* *The New York Times*, April 29, 1966.

placeable-how all of that is being deflected from, well, the real war nationally, which is the war against poverty, and the real war internationally, which is what Dom Helder Camara called "the state of pre-violence" in which the third world is presently condemned to live and die, the pre-violence of deprivation.*

Berrigan had said that nations, as persons, could learn best from equals. Since no nation is equal to the United States in terms of power, to whom should it turn, from whom would it best learn?

BERRIGAN: A nation, if it is healthy, has almost as much to learn from its enemies as it does from its friends, and the listening in the two directions is important. Friends will almost invariably tell us what we want to hear, especially if they are deeply dependent upon us in a material way. But our enemies, who for various reasons are cut off from us and who bombard us with unwelcome news, are also rather important to our soul. I was thinking in this regard of some of the analyses that have come from China in recent months and which get a little bit beyond rhetoric and a little bit beyond hate talk and really begin to talk about the profound reaction of the East to our war. But in any case, this struggle for identity with a great power like ourselves is, I take it, practically impossible to conduct within our borders. I don't think that Americans can know themselves from talking to Americans, no matter how highly placed or how intellectual or how artistic. I think this has to be a dialogue with the world. And this kind of exchange with the world is *exactly* what the war tends to cut off. Our highly placed officials no longer want to talk seriously, even with our friends, about who we are because our friends also are growing increasingly uneasy about who we are.

France now can talk to us directly and critically because of a certain native experience, colonial experience, war experience,

* Dom Helder is the Archbishop of Recife, Brazil. The present regime in Brazil, which has declared war on communism and corruption, has seemingly added some prominent members of the Roman Catholic Church to its targets. When Dom Helder issued a statement criticising the regime for injustices committed against the workers, he was declared a "leftist" and a disturber of men and ideas. When the showdown came,

President Humberto Castelo Branco flew to Recife. From that conference, Dom Helder won concessions, but the struggle in which he is involved continues.

and also a certain healthy Gallic dislike for many of our pretensions. But most other countries cannot feel such independence. It seems so utterly foolish, for instance, for us to think that we could really learn something about ourselves from India or, let's say, even from some of the Latin countries. Or, even in any profound sense, from England.

FINN: If this judgment applies to persons and to nations, is it applicable to groups within the nation which are sometimes deeply estranged from each other?

BERRIGAN: Now within our society, of course, I would find a kind of honest irreducible core, an independent, incorruptible core, in civil rights people and the student movements, the New Left, and then hopefully also in some of these public officials that we've discussed earlier. And I have a suspicion that being involved deeply in some aspect of social struggle or social change is a powerful kind of boot-camp preparation for a correct stance internationally. Maybe this is one reason why the Negro has so much to say to us with regard to our war.

FINN: I'm not quite sure I know what you mean-there are groups, civil rights groups, that have criticized U.S. participation in Vietnam, but there are also a large number of Negroes who, like other Americans, either support or at least go along with, without much question or reservation, Administration policy.

BERRIGAN: I wish I had more evidence about this, Jim. You know, I had some evidence in teach-ins in Harlem and in discussing the war with the poor in general, and I find-again, I'd have to be very tentative about this-but I find an extraordinarily high proportion of the *poor* opposed to the war. And also I find that their reasons in general are quite thoughtful and quite eloquently expressed. They have to do with a profound sense of the danger of the exportation of violence. Their ideas also have to do with the experience of spiritual and physical violence which they themselves have endured.

FINN: And these people really *project* to the international scene the things that the United States is doing?

BERMAN: They have that sense also. Maybe the *bridge* to that sense is their kind of conclusion about our hypocrisy in an-

nouncing two simultaneous wars. That is, a war in Vietnam and a war against poverty at home.

FINN: You mean that we are willing to expend relatively little on this war at home and great sums on what we do in Vietnam?

BERRIGAN: Yes. One cab driver, one Negro cab driver, questioned the hawks at one teach-in that I was at in Harlem. After quoting the monthly figures on the war on poverty and the war in Vietnam, he said: "Gentlemen, I would like to ask you which war are we really fighting?"

FINN: You mentioned the New Left and you mentioned some student groups. Do you think that there is among these students, or among the younger people in this country generally, a more critical attitude than there is among older people?

BERRZGAN: I don't know, Jim, whether I would be able to cut it that clear, you know. Again I want to be very tentative about this. My impression over the last months, in trying to get

to all sorts of audiences, is that the line of division is not so much a matter of age or a matter of status or position in the sense of student or non-student or that. It seems to be a matter more of, say, middle class or upper middle class versus, let's say, some form of social involvement; and I want to include in that latter category the poor themselves, those who are really the subjects of social change here.

And it might be a little bit of help to note that the further you go into the suburbs to talk against the Vietnam war, the more difficult it becomes, and the more hysterical the opposition becomes. Whereas in the inner city, by and large, you'll get a better hearing.

FINN: If I understand correctly what you're saying, the judgments that people make about United States participation in a war, such as Vietnam, is a part of a total reaction that they have to their own lives, and to the way in which they participate in, say, their own community and the community which is the nation.

BERRIGAN: I would almost be willing to go so far as to say that. I buy very much the distinction that the editor of the *Saturday Review*, Norman Cousins, made about nine months ago when he said that racial and religious differences are not the

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sharpest lines that are dividing the human family, but the line which is most discernibly growing in attitudes toward existence are those that have to do with life and non-life; those who, on the one hand, would agree that man has a future and that human life is valuable and who are willing to work toward that, and those who don't. And how do you favor life unless you've struggled for life?

We return to the discussion of nuclear weapons systems and the possible differing attitudes that people have. In the course of this, Berrigan refers to the "atheism of the state."

FINN: Is it even sensible to talk about the state being atheistic or Christian? Are these good ways of describing a state? Is not the state necessarily secular in its actions, no matter whether the citizens themselves are atheists or Christians or Moslems or whatever?

BERMAN: Well, I really don't know what to say, except that I find that maybe the religious neutrality of the state gets a little bit thin when we speak of concrete situations in which a given state is demanding certain things of its citizens, among whom are believers. Are they to regard this state, for instance, as neutral if it is demanding their lives in a way which only God has a right to demand them, or demanding a style of life which is in contravention to what their own faith is demanding of them? It seems to me that a state which in principle we could call neutral, can become possessed by the dominations and powers as the New Testament gives us evidence, and may, with regard to this community of believers, become an actively evil force.

FINN: The statements of Jesus, of course, seem to apply mostly to the individual. He makes very few about collective actions which apply to the state.

BERRIGAN: Of course, the Gospel that finally got written down is not trying to create a stereotype within a kind of volcanic history that we all knew occurred afterward. And perhaps, as I think you're implying, it would be very wrong to look

for precise guidelines that would just take this book across twenty centuries and make it a kind of blueprint for immediate action today. I don't think it's that at all. This would take the freedom and the adventuresomeness out of this whole Christian

vocation. But at the same time I have this perplexity: central to the Gospels is the Christian experience of Christ, which is not *solely* the experience of God in this human situation. But this experience is now to be *lived* in *community* and in person throughout history. And as we turn to that experience of who Christ was and the way he responded to human life and human beings, we find that invariably his response was nonviolent and sacrificial. And this was joined to a strong interior freedom which expressed itself in the invitation to discipleship on the part of others. So that he actually, in word and then in work, submitted before the powers of this world and died in order to release new life into human history. And this, to me, is the heart of the matter. This pattern of response to life and to human beings and to violence-at least in its general outlines demands of us, I feel, such a quality of life and such a quality of resources that we would rather endure violence than inflict it.

FINN: I find it very difficult to ask the question I really want to ask. If that is the case, how possible is it for most men to follow that example? People have said in the past that Christianity is impractical; some people have said it's nevertheless true; and others have said that it's both true and practical; and others say if it's impractical, it *can't* be true-or at least men cannot be called upon to follow something which is impractical because most men will not do that. And I wonder whether one can expect most people to live in a way which they would regard as impractical.

BERRIGAN: Well, I find it very difficult to believe that in a humanity which is governed by the providence of God, which we believe is declared in His Son, there would not be the resources available to man to make this invitation felt. Which is another way of saying that I find it very difficult to reduce this thing to a small knot of people who are lost in the midst of a violent and violence-oriented mass. It seems to me we have some thing perhaps directly opposite. When we turn outward to the human community we find vast and growing resources of competence and of compassion at work everywhere; the workers of violence and those who really place violence on the line *the* kind of unique and *impeccable* tool, are in fact themselves minority.

FINN: Yes, but if we take what the just-war theory of suggested, it's not an attempt to use violence as the best t

but a recognition that man is weak and broken and fallen, that whatever he will resort to violence and therefore the need is to place civilizing limitations on violence that one can. It is a recognition of-in theological terms-the fall, or-in psychological terms-an illness or possibly a need for violence in man

BERRIGAN: I'm just wondering, though, Jim, whether or not that kind of moral theology, again, has to be taken in its historical setting. It seems to me that we were dealing, at the time the concept was elaborated, with Christians who had pretty much lost hold of their Christian roots; a period which was quite decadent with regard to liturgy and to scripture and to the seeding of the ideas of Christ into community, and which was pretty much living off second-rate sources. Even such noble sources as call ^{Saint} man ^{Thomas} conclusion: itforseemsthe to me, were substituting a minimal hoof discipleship. And this, I take it, is our great opportunity today. Since the Council we have these *explicit* invitations to return to the Gospel and to personal discipleship, and to ask not so much, "what are the wise men of Christian history saying to us about conscience?" as "what has Christ our Lord made possible for conscience?" This only the Gospels and our worship and our life together can tell us. What does our life *really* ask of us?

FINN: One more question. Do you think that with enough imagination the United States *could* find ways of protecting its interests *without* resorting to war?

BERRIGAN: Ah, now we're really talking! My answer would be an unqualified yes. I believe that with all my heart. That's the kind of credo I can still give to the American Revolution as continuing, viable, and experimental in the world. And your question also lies at the heart of my protest. I protest because I am an *American* and because I see in this war or other points of violence today the defeat and destruction of that which we had to offer the world and that which we had to offer our own continuing growth. Which is to say, the exportation, the internationalization, of the American experience.