

Features

Activists find common ground in consistent life ethic

By Lee Strong

For Father Joseph Nangle, OFM, the journey began in the slums of Lima, Peru. "Biology" was the spark that started Juli Loesch on the road. The women's movement — and a Mennonite upbringing — motivated Cathryn Holderread Passmore to move down the path.

Traveling separate routes, all three arrived at a common belief in a consistent ethic of life embracing non-violence, the right-to-life and the immorality of nuclear weapons.

The three described their spiritual journeys to 65 retreatants gathered at Our Lady of the Genesee Abbey in Piffard for the Faith and Resistance Retreat, December 4-5. In addition to presentations and discussions, the retreat included acts of civil disobedience at the Seneca Army Depot.

"What we're trying to do is to bring together the issues around a consistent ethic of life" explained Father Daniel O'Shea, one of the retreat's organizers. Participants came to the retreat from either pro-life or anti-war backgrounds, and the retreat — along with earlier gatherings — was an attempt to unite the two movements.

This attempt was partly stimulated by an ad published in newspapers across the nation earlier this year by Prolifers for Survival, Father O'Shea said. The ad called for the adoption of the "seamless garment" ethic — a belief in a consistent pro-life stance on such issues as abortion, war, capital punishment and euthanasia — as voiced by Cardinal Joseph L. Bernardin of Chicago.

Father O'Shea had been meeting with several local priests and lay people to discuss the seamless garment ethic. Last summer after seeing the ad, the group organized a series of talks and retreats to promote the seamless garment ideal and to foster unity between the separate movements. Father Richard Rohr lectured about the Catholic tradition of non-violence at St. Mary's, Rochester, on November 2. Father George Freemesser and Abbot John Eudes Bamberger directed a day of spiritual renewal and fasting at the abbey November 10.

In addition to linking the movements, one of the retreat's goals last Friday was to break down stereotypes of the two groups. In fact, Loesch began her first talk by jokingly asking the pro-life people and the anti-war people to raise their right or left wings, respectively. Her mentions of several stereotypes of the two groups drew knowing — but not always comfortable — laughter from the retreatants.

Dr. Kenneth Berkes of Penn Yan, who comes from a pro-life background, acknowledged that participating in the three sessions had helped dispel some of his negative impressions of the anti-war movement. He and four friends attended the retreat because they could see that the organizers were attempting to "stand within the moral teachings of the Church."

"We know we have to support others that are seeking to stand in God's truth, and who do so with compassion," he said. He acknowledged that he wasn't completely comfortable with the retreat schedule's inclusion of civil disobedience, but noted that "the re-



Father Daniel O'Shea, James Callan and Robert Werth (left to right), along with other protestors, are forced back through the Seneca Army Depot gates by security forces, Friday, Dec. 4.

treat had changed his perception of the anti-war issue."

A number of retreatants remarked that their opinions of members of the other group had been challenged by contact between the two, and by the talks by the three presenters. Their separate approaches caused the presenters to point out a variety of links between life issues.

For example, Father Nangle, director of Peace and Justice for the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, endorsed violence and revolution at one point in his life. He served as a missionary in Lima, Peru, for 15 years, and the cruel treatment the poor received there convinced him that they would be justified in striking back.

After returning to the United States, however, he went on a directed retreat. During the retreat, he thought about the way in which Jesus had responded to violence and injustice. "Jesus saved us by taking on himself all suffering and sin for the sake of humanity," he explained. "Jesus absorbed the evil — that's the only way to overcome evil."

Upon returning from the retreat to a soup kitchen where he then worked, Father Nangle began experimenting with non-violent responses. He discovered that when he consistently responded with gentleness and understanding to the anger and violence of the people he served, his presence began to exert a calming influence. In talking with others who worked in soup kitchens or shelters, he found they'd learned the same lesson.

Facing evil without violence can lead to

suffering or death, Father Nangle acknowledged, but when those consequences are accepted with love, they only add to an individual's ability to confront evil. He cited Archbishop Oscar Romero as a contemporary example of one who resisted evil through his death. "I have to travel to El Salvador frequently," he said. "I always visit (Archbishop Romero's) tomb, and I'm amazed at the number of people there every day. Oscar Romero has done more in death than he could have done had he lived to be 200."

Juli Loesch, who founded Prolifers for Survival, arrived at her beliefs by an entirely different route. In the 1960s, she became interested in the effects of radiation on living organisms. In the course of her investigations, she learned that unborn children are extremely sensitive to radiation — so much so that doctors no longer permit pregnant women to have X-rays except in emergencies. She read about deformed babies born to Japanese women who lived near Hiroshima and Nagasaki, about children who developed leukemia because they were born downwind of nuclear test sites, and about miscarriages resulting when women worked or lived near uranium mines, processing plants or disposal facilities. "I realized the nuclear weapons industry is engaged in megabortion," she said.

Loesch's studies of nuclear and abortion issues led her to the conclusion that "the abortion mentality is the nuclear mentality." Both mentalities "tell us that there's an entire seg-

ment of the human spectrum that can be eliminated without concern (in order) to achieve a military, political or social goal. The goals are all right, it's the means I object to when the means are murder."

Cathryn Holderread Passmore, a feminist activist who once worked to legalize abortion, arrived at her understanding of the seamless garment ethic as a result of a college roommate's abortion. The friend visited Passmore 16 years after the procedure, complaining of severe depression. As the two talked, the friend suddenly made the connection between the abortion and her depressions — and collapsed in tears.

In her work as a counselor, Passmore has met many women with similar problems. "No one is giving them permission to grieve," she explained. "We tell them, 'It had to be done; it was the right choice.'" Re-examining her pro-choice stance in light of the experiences of these women and the consistent non-violent stance of the Mennonite Church, she experienced a sudden conversion to the consistent life ethic.

The three presenters' talks helped prepare the retreat participants for discussing the most controversial aspect of the Faith and Resistance Retreat — civil disobedience. Originally, the retreat schedule called for acts of civil disobedience at the Seneca Army Depot and Genesee Hospital. The hospital action was changed to a simple protest at the request of the leaders of Project Life, however, because of legal problems resulting from acts of civil disobedience committed there earlier this year.

Plans for the depot action remained intact, however, and participants discussed its wisdom. Several individuals asked whether blocking the depot's entry road would convey a message of peace. Others pointed out the concerns of the depot workers, suggesting that if participants criticize the depot, they should be prepared to offer depot workers suggestions on employment alternatives.

Finally, 25 individuals, including a number of priests, chose to risk arrest. After a Mass at the depot's main gate, they blocked the entrance. The guards locked the gates, and

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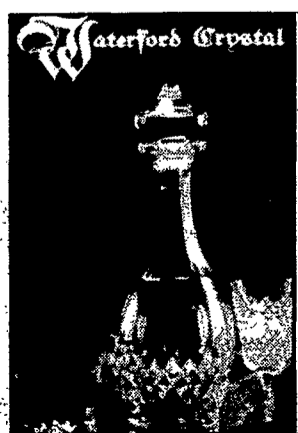
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