

# Where have the Catholic radicals gone?

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ties, Meconis said.

"I think if you look at the people who were involved in the Catholic Left, many are still involved in issues of peace and justice," Meconis noted.

Their continuing involvement, he suggested, can be traced to the movement's very roots.

One of those roots was Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement, noted James Douglass, author of the 1968 book, *The Non-Violent Cross*, and, this year, of *The Nonviolent Coming of God*.

"When the Vietnam War occurred, there were people in the U.S. Catholic community who were prepared for it in ways that other people were not because they had been through the 'school of Dorothy Day,'" Douglass observed in a telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier*.

Day had been one of the founders of the Catholic Worker movement in 1933. That movement combined care for the homeless and hungry with support for labor and a belief in non-violence, Douglass said.

In the spring of 1957, for example, Day and other Catholic Workers were arrested for refusing to participate in mandated bomb-shelter drills in New York City.

"The Catholic Worker was just an immense example to Dan and myself and my wife, Elizabeth McAlister," Philip Berrigan acknowledged in a telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier*. "We were impressed by their anti-war position, by their living in poverty, by their serving the poor."

Douglass said he learned about the bomb-shelter protest when he was a freshman in college and that he disagreed with the action. But his position changed after he began to read the *Catholic Worker* newspaper, which explained the Catholic Worker position.

By 1961, Douglass was writing for the newspaper himself, joining Gordon Zahn and Father Thomas Merton as the leading Catholic advocates of pacifism.

A second factor in the emergence of the Catholic Left was Pope John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council, Meconis noted. He said the pope's 1963 encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, contained passages some Catholics interpreted as endorsing both pacifism — which the Catholic Church had not endorsed previously — and civil disobedience.

Those ideas were echoed in the Vatican II document "The Church in the Modern World," which condemned wars in which entire cities or extensive areas are destroyed along with their civilian populations and conditionally endorsed pacifism, Douglass observed.

A third factor was Catholics' growing comfort with their position in the United States, noted Harry Murray, a professor of sociology at Nazareth College, and author of a 1990 study of the Catholic Worker movement, *Do Not Neglect Hospitality*.

"Up until the election of President John Kennedy, the Catholic Church in the United States was jingoistically patriotic," Murray said. "There was a fear among American Catholics of being seen as un-American, as pawns of a foreign power."

By the 1960s, however, Catholics were beginning to feel "more accepted as Americans, so they were be-

ginning to feel free to be more critical," Murray said.

Yet another ingredient in the mix was missionary activity, particularly in Latin America, observed Fred Wilcox, author of the 1991 book *Uncommon Martyrs: The Plowshare Movement and the Catholic Left*.

"Missionaries (in the 1960s) saw terrible injustice in Central American and South America," noted Wilcox, who teaches at Ithaca College. "They also saw in many cases that the U.S. government was supporting the people committing these injustices. That radicalized many of them."

Father Daniel Berrigan, SJ, pointed to the civil-rights movement as pivotal to his own development as an activist.

"I would say that the civil-rights movement had kind of shaken us," Father Daniel Berrigan said in an interview with the *Catholic Courier*. "I think it was a tremendous kind of boot camp in training in non-violence."

In October, 1967, Father Philip Ber-

"People were shocked," Wilcox observed. "I think most of their fellow Catholics found them to be quite frightening."

For the next four years, the Catholic Left continued to make headlines, staging numerous raids and writing about their beliefs and efforts.

But like much of the anti-war movement, by 1972 the Catholic Left had begun "to run out of gas," Philip Berrigan said. "People did not have the kind of inspiration and interpersonal support to go on."

Even at its peak, Meconis noted, the Catholic Left was a small movement. Although demonstrations drew large numbers, the movement's actual core — those willing to commit civil disobedience — numbered just more than 200.

But while the movement splintered as a political entity, the people in it remained involved, Wilcox noted.

"The Catholic Left had a spiritual grounding that the secular anti-war

Douglass and his wife, Shelly, moved to Seattle and created the Pacific Life Community. They also launched efforts to oppose Trident nuclear submarines, some of which are based in Seattle, and the White Train campaign to protest the transportation of nuclear materials — including warheads — across the country by train.

Philip Berrigan and Elizabeth McAlister, formed Jonah House in Baltimore, which since 1973 has been a center of anti-nuclear and anti-war protests in the Washington area.

"We came to the realization that trying to resist without community in this society makes hamburger out of you," he said.

Some other members of the Catholic Left have emerged as leaders in peace and justice work in dioceses and through various organizations, Meconis noted. The Catholic Peace Fellowship and Pax Christi, U.S.A. were both established by movement members.

Meanwhile, protests — and arrests — continued. Both Berrigans were arrested in September, 1980, for attempting to damage nuclear warheads at a plant in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania. That action — called the Plowshares Eight — has been followed by several similar anti-nuclear actions. Douglass, McAlister, Meconis and others have also been arrested repeatedly.

But the Catholic Left has also had an impact on the mainstream Catholic Church, Douglass suggested.

He and Meconis both provided input into the writing of *The Challenge of Peace*, the U.S. Catholic bishops' pastoral letter on war. "The Catholic Left also led to a much more significant opposition in the Catholic Church to the Persian Gulf war than there was to the Vietnam War," Douglass added.

Meconis pointed out that a some members of the U.S. Catholic hierarchy — including Seattle Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen and Bishops Thomas Gumbleton of Detroit and Leroy Matthesan of Amarillo, Texas — have openly acknowledged the Catholic Left's influence on their lives.

Further, Meconis said, the Catholic Left explored methods of nonviolent protest and willingness to accept punishment that have been employed since by Catholics protesting issues ranging from nuclear weapons to abortion.

And while no longer a distinct movement in the way it was 20 years ago, the Catholic Left continues to draw new members, Father Daniel Berrigan observed.

At the first plowshares action in 1980, he noted, he and his brother were the only two members of the old movement among the eight people arrested.

"It's just a new coalition formed with new people in the '80s and '90s," Father Berrigan observed. "That's fine. That's the way it should be."

Philip Berrigan, meanwhile, plans to continue the activism in which he has taken part for more than 20 years.

"The problem of nuclear arms remains," he said. "We won't have social justice and progress until we start to disarm. I'm going to do this the rest of my life."



rigan — a Josephite priest who was excommunicated by the Catholic Church in 1973 when his 1969 marriage to Sister Elizabeth McAlister, RSHM, was publicly revealed — and three other individuals staged the first draft board raid, pouring blood on draft files in Baltimore.

Father Daniel Berrigan had not yet committed civil disobedience, but by the time his brother had done so, he was ready to follow that lead.

"We all did what we could within the law for years," Father Daniel Berrigan said. "Vigils, fasts, writing letters, marching, we did all that, and the war only got worse."

It was the Catonsville protest that thrust the Berrigans to the forefront of public notions of the Catholic Left, Meconis said.

"They were highly visible Catholic figures taking a very strong anti-war position, which, at that time, was surprising," Meconis noted. Previously, he pointed out, the church had always been supportive of U.S. military efforts, and especially those targeted against communists.

movement didn't have," he explained. "They had the ability to translate the Gospel into the lives they led, enabling them to continue to do the work while people in the secular left dropped out."

The members of the Catholic Left began to apply their efforts elsewhere, Douglass said, pointing to the movement's Catholic Worker roots to explain the shift in focus.

"Dorothy Day's vision and her unified way of non-violence doesn't mean just opposition to war," Douglass explained. "The people who took part in the draft board raids saw it as part of the works of mercy. They simply took on the other side of opposition to war — a commitment to serving people."

Many members of the Catholic Left became involved with Catholic Worker houses, soup kitchens and homeless shelters, Meconis noted. They also have participated in the Sanctuary Movement, opposition to U.S. involvement in Central America, and most recently, to the war in the Persian Gulf.