

## THE MIRACLE OF DAN BERRIGAN

Jim Forest. *At Play in the Lions' Den: A Biography and Memoir of Daniel Berrigan*. Orbis Books, 2017.

*William O'Rourke*

I first wrote about Dan Berrigan in my 1972 book on the Harrisburg 7. He had been an unindicted co-conspirator in that case. And he showed up in town while the trial was in progress, finally having been freed from prison, paroled, after nearly dying from a botched medical procedure. I described him then this way: "This Berrigan has a prelapsarian face; creatures of an enchanted forest come to mind." More followed. It's not entirely clear to me now, but most likely I was introduced, being one of a small group that surrounded him during a recess of the trial. We didn't speak directly.

But, he would turn up at various events I attended, and, because of my book on the trial, he seemed to know who I was. The last time I saw, spoke with, him was in South Hadley, Massachusetts, when I taught at Mount Holyoke College at the end of the 1970s. I walked into a local coffee place and there he was, sitting with someone I did not know. Berrigan looked up when I approached and his face took on an expression of surprise that flickered momentarily. We chatted for a bit, me filling him in on why I was where I was. It was nearly ten years since the trial, but he hadn't seemed to have aged much. He was wearing a black watch cap. I, I'm sure, had changed. Berrigan looked somewhat resigned. Not that anything I said to him cheered him up. Eqbal Ahmad, one of the Harrisburg 7 defendants, was teaching at nearby Hampshire College, yet another coincidence or connection. The fellow Berrigan was sitting with wasn't introduced and remained silent throughout our exchange. Who knows? This could have been a portentous rendezvous. The King of Prussia Plowshares 8 action (GE nuclear facility, pouring blood, etc.) had yet to occur and was right around the corner (Sept. 9, 1980).

A "Biography and Memoir" does double duty for any single author, though, overall, there is more biography in Jim Forest's new book than memoir. Indeed, when finished I knew more about Dan Berrigan, S.J., than I did about the author. And I already knew quite a bit about Berrigan. Memoir, as I have noted before, doesn't come from memory, but memorandum, the recording of important events and Forest illuminates any number when both he and Berrigan overlap. But, as the photograph on its cover shows, this is Berrigan's book.

Anyone who wants to read only one book on Dan Berrigan, this is it. And the reader will be getting many works at once: A history of the Catholic radicalism of the last fifty years, a digest of many books Berrigan himself wrote, a chronology of the social history of both the Catholic church and the Jesuit Order in America, among others. Overall, the volume amounts to a compendium, including helpful photographs and excerpts of other literature.

For nearly fifty years, the Berrigan name was most often plural. It was Dan and Phil, the Berrigans, ever since they both appeared in Catonsville, Maryland, in 1968 to burn draft files. That became the signature event of the new Catholic left protest movement of the period. The reasons are many: The success of the 1970 play Dan wrote about the trial, using the transcript as its base, the film that appeared not long after, the inherent symbolism in the tiny immolation the nine participants sparked, echoing the war they protested and their own religious motives. An exhaustive book titled *The Catonsville Nine* by Shawn Francis Peters appeared in 2012.

Catonsville was hard to top, but many other actions followed. The documentary *Hit & Stay* (2013) is the most complete record of this sector of the anti-Vietnam war movement. It was a busy time. Forest, himself, was part of the Milwaukee 14, covers a good bit of this ground, but what is even more illuminating is his treatment of the Berrigans' childhood, Dan's years becoming a Jesuit, a long process, and the last twenty years of his life, quieted by both his own aging and the curdling of the culture. Berrigan's last appearance at a protest was Zuccotti Park during the Occupy Wall Street moment in 2011. He was there though did not speak. (Forest quotes Joe Cosgrove, "Dan's witness could not have been louder.")

But speak Berrigan did through most of this life. Previous to Catonsville, Dan, like any number of men of his generation, went from the most provincial of upbringing—poor, an abusive father—to become a worldly figure. The so-called Greatest Generation was, most regrettably, great because WWII took so many ordinary Americans, plucked them from parochial backgrounds, and introduced them to the wide world. In Philip Berrigan's case, it was his stint in the army. In Dan's case, it was the Jesuits, sending him to France, Czechoslovakia, South America as a young man. One of the great harms of Vietnam, the war that concentrated the Berrigans' fame, was that great widening, enlightening, didn't happen with the young generation of men who fought in it.

Forest's book is consistently interesting for even those, like me, who know a great deal about its subjects. It is his intimate side of the "memoir" parts, so we see Dan Berrigan as one of an extended family, as well as a

number of his associates Forest shares: Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day, in particular. Forest's portrait of Merton is especially revealing.

There were ups and downs throughout Dan and Phil's careers as professional protestors. The largest down was the Harrisburg 7 trial, not an event they brought about. It was the product of J. Edgar Hoover and his FBI, which had turned a willing informer who shared a prison with Philip, and his love affair with Elizabeth McAlister, into a federal case. It was a large road bump in the Catholic Left's progression and reputation.

They had gained the moral high ground with the sui generis draft board raids and Hoover sought to knock them off their pedestal. The smuggled and duplicated letters of Phil and Liz gave them all the ammunition required and though the government prosecutors lost the case (hung jury on major counts, convictions of Liz and Phil on minor counts that were later voided), Hoover's intention was achieved. The Berrigans' group splintered, reformed as Jonah House in Baltimore, and anti-nuclear weapons became the protestors focus for the remainder of their years.

Dan, himself, mostly free of collateral damage from the Harrisburg case, wandered into some unfortunate controversies, centering first in 1973 on Arabs and Israel. He, not to put too fine a point on it, attacked the Jews. Forest goes through this material carefully, though he doesn't dwell on a lot of the anti-Semitic historical material relating to the early 20th century Catholic Church. It was a no-win situation for Berrigan and, in this one case, he seemed to go off half-cocked, given his lack of familiarity with Israel at the time, which he corrected after the blowup. Given the natural allies of the anti-war left, this estrangement lessened his influence for a short time. (The current far left, for better or worse, now echoes most of his criticism.) The second bump was a clear-cut and vocal anti-abortion stance, just as second-wave feminism was rising. Again, to left political coalitions, there continues to be the sour equation: Pro-Life = Donald Trump.

The sibling rivalry between Phil and Dan, often commented on, seemed in later life to turn on Phil's marriage to McAlister. Dan, alone, knew of the alliance before the news came out during preparation for the Harrisburg trial, but he was never able to entirely square it with his deeply held affections for his brother. Forest quotes a letter from Dan to Phil: "I had of course in no way been prepared for this. How could I be?" It remained a betrayal, however mysterious its reasons, to Dan, not wholly understandable, since it was so far from Dan's own loyalty to his Jesuit vows.

It was a betrayal to a lot of people in the now old New Catholic Left. But, among the many charms of Forest's valuable book, are the photographs that abound in the margins. And on page 219 the reader will see one of Phil

and Liz and two of their young children. Both the adults look so happy.

Over the years I kept track, somewhat lazily, of Dan Berrigan. He, like Leonard Boudin, one of the principal attorneys of the Harrisburg case, kept prophesying his own imminent death, but Berrigan outlived his dour predictions. (Though Leonard wasn't so lucky; he died in 1989 at age 77.) Forest covers Berrigan's final years well, post Philip's demise in 2002, when Dan lived, for the most part, quietly, in Manhattan, not emerging much after his Occupy Wall Street appearance. Living till 94 (he died in 2016) was a miracle of sorts, so if Pope Francis, a fellow Jesuit, is looking for another saint—one to offset Mother Teresa—he might turn his kind eyes toward Dan Berrigan, S.J. One necessary—required—miracle has been already proven.