The World Community for Christian Meditation

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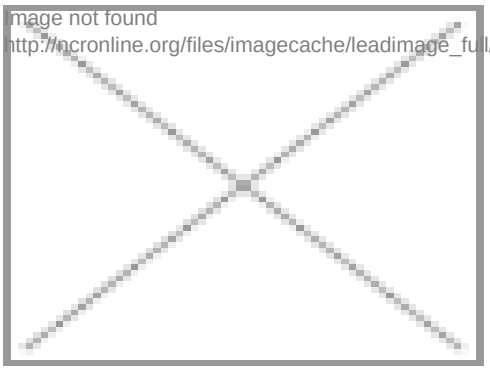
Tribute to a Peacemaker



Jesuit Fr. Daniel Berrigan (Patricia Lefevere)

NEW YORK -- The man who for decades has stood against the powers that be needed the arm of his niece Frida Berrigan to steady him in the front-row pew of the Church of St. Joseph in Greenwich Village, and he needed help from sister-in-law Elizabeth McAlister to get to the pulpit, but once there, the power of his words filled the assembly.

Almost 91, Jesuit Fr. Daniel Berrigan -- author of 50 books, 18 of them volumes of poetry, and more than double that number of arrests for civil disobedience -- looked frail and walked haltingly, but he still commanded attention from the more than 200 people gathered here Jan. 29 for a tribute to his life and work.

The event was organized by Pax Christi Metro New York. Berrigan?s brief remarks followed a host of speakers who remembered his life in words. They were mostly his words during a two-hour tribute that included segments of his poems, essays, sermons and court testimony.

One speaker remembered Berrigan for the shortest commencement speech in history: ?Know where you stand and stand there,? was the full text. Berrigan told *NCR* he gave the address down the road a piece, pointing toward Xavier High School on West 16th Street.

Other speakers recalled his work with his Jesuit confreres, his ministering to cancer and HIV/AIDs patients in New York and the hundreds of students he had taught at universities -- Yale, Fordham, Cornell, Berkeley, the Loyolas of Los Angeles and New Orleans -- and other halls of learning.

Colleen Kelly, who lost her firefighter brother, Zachary, on 9/11, told *NCR* that Berrigan

?means so much in my life and in the lives of many 9/11 families.? Her friend Molly Welsh Kruger, a teacher of teachers who got to know Berrigan during her days at Fordham University in New York, said it was nearly impossible to say ?how much this man has impacted so many lives.?

Divine Providence Sr. Mary Jennings spoke for many when she said the message of Dan Berrigan is ?be involved with peace, forget about violence and live as Jesus would want you to live.? It is a message she tries to impart at the residence for working women that the sisters run on West 24th Street, she said.

Much of the heady days of Vietnam protest and Plowshares actions against nuclear weapons were reprised in photos, words and music supplied by a quartet of vagabond troupers from the Catholic Worker calling themselves ?The Filthy Rotten System.? They led the audience in renditions of ?How Can I Keep from Singing? and ?The Times They Are a-Changin?.?

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