

Father Daniel Berrigan's life of dissent

REVIEW BY JOE MARTIN
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

In a parking lot outside a Selective Service Office, a batch of hastily pilfered draft files has been doused with homemade napalm and set alight. Instructions for making the napalm — a concoction of kerosene and Ivory Soap flakes — had been found in a Green Beret manual on a shelf at Georgetown University Library.

The scene unfolds in Catonsville, Maryland, on May 17, 1968. Nine people have just raided the office. They stand around the flames awaiting arrest in prayer and protest against the Vietnam War. Two of the assembled are Catholic priests, brothers Daniel and Philip Berrigan. Their names will become synonymous with nonviolent

resistance to America's bloody incursion into Southeast Asia and to other militaristic ventures.

Younger brother Philip was a hardened combat veteran of World War II. Daniel spent those war years in the United States as a Jesuit seminarian. On returning from the war, Philip became a priest with the Josephite order, which ministered to African American Catholics. In the course of his work he became radicalized

by witnessing the struggles of his Black parishioners. Daniel wrote how they revealed to Philip "the real meaning of hate, fear, and discrimination ... Blacks lived in battered neighborhoods, went to rundown schools and worked rotten jobs ... Whites owned the banks and businesses, Blacks mopped the floors."

Philip perceived the twin evils of racism and militarism as impediments to a sane society. He concluded that safe legal methods of opposing pervasive bigotry, profligate Pentagon spending, and reckless military adventurism did little to alter social inequities or mitigate our pursuit of war. His older Jesuit brother, already a renowned poet, became profoundly influenced by Philip's evolving political consciousness. Like Philip, Daniel would engage in a life of civil disobedience and eloquent writing,

decrying war and injustice.

Author Jim Forest's memoir of Daniel is a rich homage to a man faithful to pacifism and activism. It is unabashedly a work of love. Daniel is portrayed in phases of his pilgrimage as a priest, poet, unrepentant peacenik and holy outlaw. It is a portrait of a committed but oh-so-human individual who admits his distress whenever arrested and anxiety in the face of potential imprisonment. Yet with illuminating words and courageous deeds he continued to challenge state-sanctioned violence as well as the complicity and timidity of churches.

In 1968, North Vietnam offered to release three captured U.S. airmen. A hopeful peace gesture. Daniel and historian Howard Zinn were invited to go there to receive the prisoners. While in Hanoi they experienced American bombs raining down upon them and the citizens of that city. In the shelters Daniel saw the terror-stricken children and in a poem he recalled:

*I picked up the littlest
a boy, his face
breaded with rice
(his sister calmly feeding him
as we climbed down)*

*in my arms fathered
in a moment's grace, the messiah
of all my tears. I bore, reborn
a Hiroshima child from Hell.*

This experience and outrage at the ongoing war led Daniel to join his fellow dissidents at Catonsville, where the draft files were set afire. It was Daniel who gave the impassioned explanation for their action: "Our apologies, good friends, for the fracture of good order, the burning of paper instead of children ... when, at what point, will you say no to this war?"

Forest's memoir follows Daniel through involvements that enriched his life and the lives of those he touched. It was not always easy, and even his allies could become infuriated with him, as happened in 1973 when he offended Jewish friends with his vehement critique of Israel for being armed to the teeth while giving only a verbal slap to Palestinian militants. The reaction prompted his visit to the Middle East to better understand the complexities. Recordings were made of Daniel's conversations, which were to become a book. The recordings disappeared en route to New York. Forest writes: "Dan wondered which

intelligence agency had intercepted and taken charge of the tapes."

Daniel's search for peace took him to many corners of the Earth. In Ireland he met with members of the Provisional Irish Republican Army. He debated fellow priest Ernesto Cardenal of Nicaragua, who had embraced the violent Sandinista revolution. He became friends with Buddhist monk and philosopher Thich Nhat Hanh. Their conversations became the book "The Raft is Not the Shore."

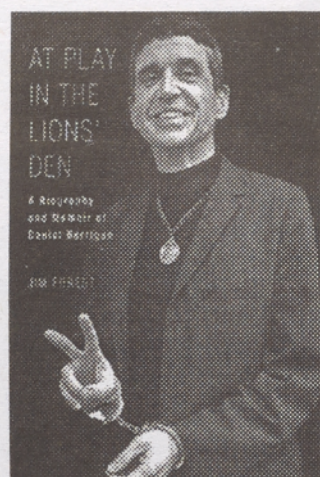
He risked serious jail time when he joined Philip and six others in the invasion of a General Electric plant in Pennsylvania where they pounded on moldings planned for nuclear warheads. A great film of the trial that followed was made with Daniel, Philip and the other defendants portraying themselves. As time went on, Daniel continued to participate in demonstrations and performed his ministry to

indigent cancer patients and those suffering from AIDS.

Daniel reflected on the plight of the homeless in his beautiful 1989 book of verse "Stations: The Way of the Cross." In the preface he wrote, "The homeless are the shadow at the heart of things, the shadow we flee. It is named death." He continued: "Filth, garbage bags, smells, dragging carts, lost looks — these are props of the drama of the all-but-lost: ourselves. Their props are the décor of an anticreation, created by ourselves. Created by conspicuous consumption, by condos and cruises, by Standard Oil, by Navyport, by a frozen war budget, by great communicators and audacious liars, by wheelers and dealers and silk suited lawless thieves."

Daniel was last arrested protesting at a military museum on April 2, 2011. He died on April 30, 2016. The epitaph he proposed appears on a supplementary marker at his gravesite: "It was never dull, alleluia!"

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

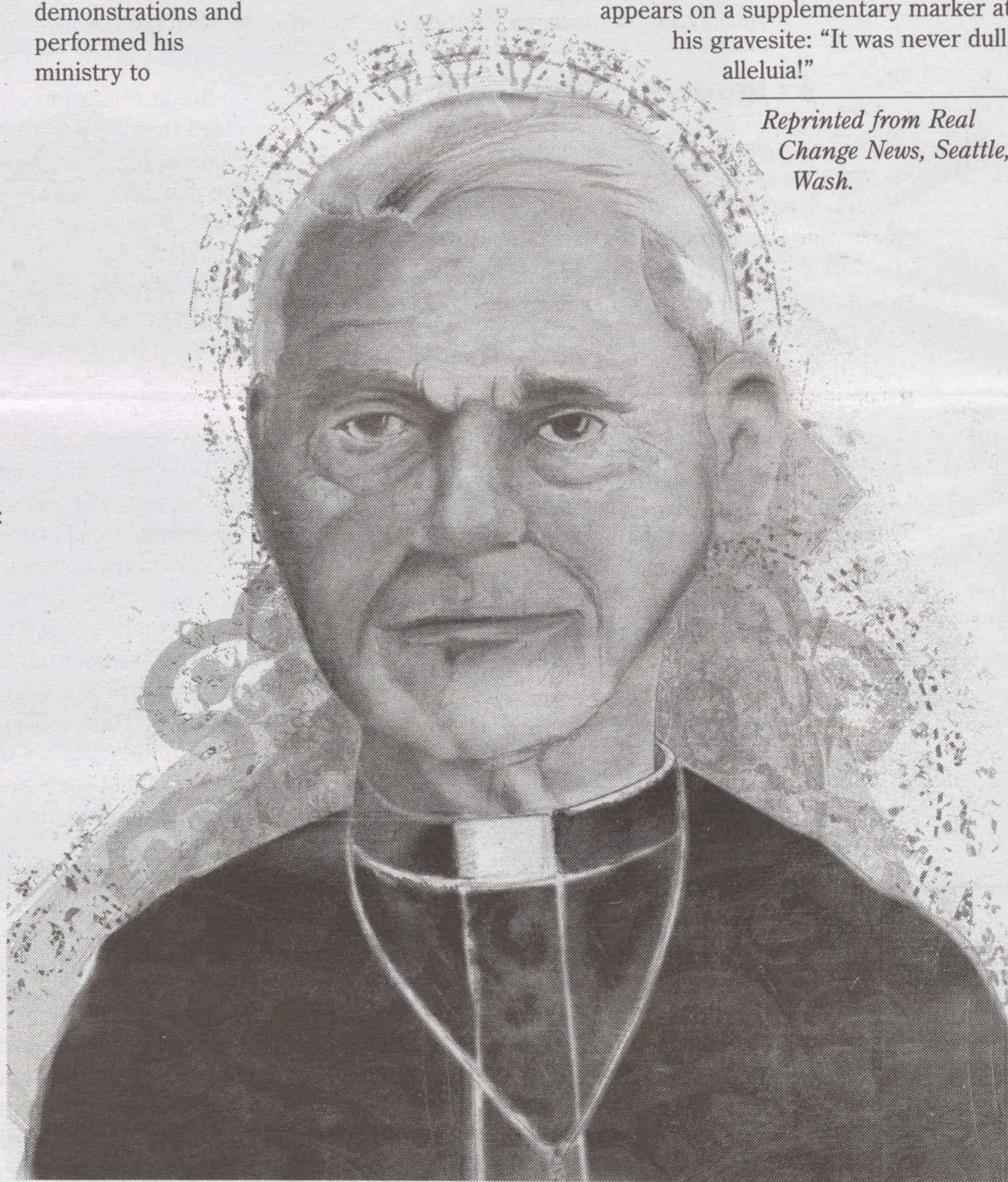


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