

Philip Berrigan praised as 'prophet of peace' at Baltimore funeral Mass

Hundreds of people marched through the troubled, poverty-stricken streets of West Baltimore Dec. 9 to celebrate the life of controversial Catholic peace activist Philip Francis Berrigan.

Led by a cross bearer and a bagpiper playing "Amazing Grace," they paid tribute to a man who put his Christian conscience on the line time after time, serving years in prison for his anti-war protests.

The former Josephite priest, best known for burning draft files in Catonsville in the late 1960s, died of liver and kidney cancer Dec. 6 at Jonah House in Baltimore. He was 79.

Clutching red and yellow roses, with some carrying peace signs and large dove figures, the mourners wound their way through the same St. Peter Claver neighborhood which Berrigan had once served as a priest.

Passing boarded-up, graffiti-scrawled row houses, friends, family and admirers followed a pickup truck carrying a simple, unfinished wooden coffin with Berrigan's remains. Painted red flowers, a cross and the words "blessed are the peacemakers" adorned the makeshift coffin, which was also accompanied by chanting, drum-beating Buddhist monks.

Inside St. Peter Claver, mourners filled every pew - spilling over into the aisles and choir loft for a funeral liturgy marked by calls for social justice and an end to war plans in Iraq.

Berrigan was the leader of the Catonsville Nine, a group of peace activists who burned 500 draft files using homemade napalm at a Selective Service office in Catonsville in 1968. A year earlier he poured blood on draft files in Baltimore with three others. Berrigan was charged with plotting to kidnap presidential advisor Henry Kissinger and blow up heating tunnels in Washington in 1971, but the charges were later dismissed.

In later years, Berrigan protested the proliferation of nuclear weapons with the organization he helped found, the International Plowshares Movement. He served more than 11 years in jail for his protest actions, most recently a 30-month term for malicious destruction of property for banging on A-10 Warthog warplanes during a 1999 protest at an Air National Guard base in Middle River.

Berrigan's brother, Jesuit Father Daniel Berrigan, who often joined his sibling in the war protests, said in his homily that Philip Berrigan was "an icon of impatience" whose legal trials strengthened his resolve.

"For his part, he would welcome crosses," said Father Berrigan.

"In death, Phil reached the place that he earned at such great cost," he added.

Brendan Walsh, a friend of Berrigan, said Berrigan never complained about the time he spent in jail and was a man committed to proclaiming what he saw as the truth. That meant speaking out against the U.S. government when it promoted war in Vietnam, Iraq and elsewhere.

"Philip Berrigan was one honest brother," said Walsh. "He was that rare combination where word and deed are one - always, everywhere. He was that tree standing by the water that would not be moved."

Elizabeth McAlister, Berrigan's widow, told the Catholic Review her husband's voice will be missed by those who care about challenging everyone to commit to peace.

"His greatest legacy is the focus on the works of justice and peace - that there can be no peace without justice and the policies of this country are not just," said McAlister, a former nun.

Among Berrigan's greatest admirers was actor Martin Sheen, who traveled from California to attend the funeral. Sheen met Berrigan in 1981 when the actor portrayed a judge involved in a case against the peace activist in the movie "In the King of Prussia."

Sheen called his friend the "gutsiest, most honest, most unbelievable man who took the Gospel seriously and personally."

“He’s one of the greatest people who ever lived and we thank God for giving him to us,” said Sheen in an interview with The Catholic Review.

Sheen said his hero was “very influential” in his own return to the Catholic faith, showing him that the Gospel has no meaning unless it is put into action.

A statement released by Chuck Michaels of Pax Christi Baltimore commended Berrigan for challenging political and religious leaders to promote the Gospel message of peace.

“Within the thunder of his pronouncements was the belief that it is within our power to heal the fractures and division among us,” the statement said.

Born in Two Harbors, Minn., Philip Berrigan served as an infantry platoon officer in the U.S. Army during World War II, fighting in France, Belgium, Netherlands and Germany.

After the war, he graduated from College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Mass. He was ordained a Josephite priest in 1955. He married without requesting a dispensation from his vows of celibacy.

Jesuit Father John Dear, who served eight months in jail with Berrigan, celebrated his friend’s funeral Mass and called Berrigan a “prophet of peace.” Other Catholic priests from across the country, along with leaders of other faiths, were also on hand for the liturgy.

Before Berrigan was laid to rest at St. Peter Claver’s cemetery, the funeral liturgy ended with a song accompanied by a banjo that was said to be his favorite.

“We are goin’ down the valley, goin’ down the valley, goin’ toward the setting sun,” the congregation sang with enthusiasm. “Goin’ down the valley one by one.”

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