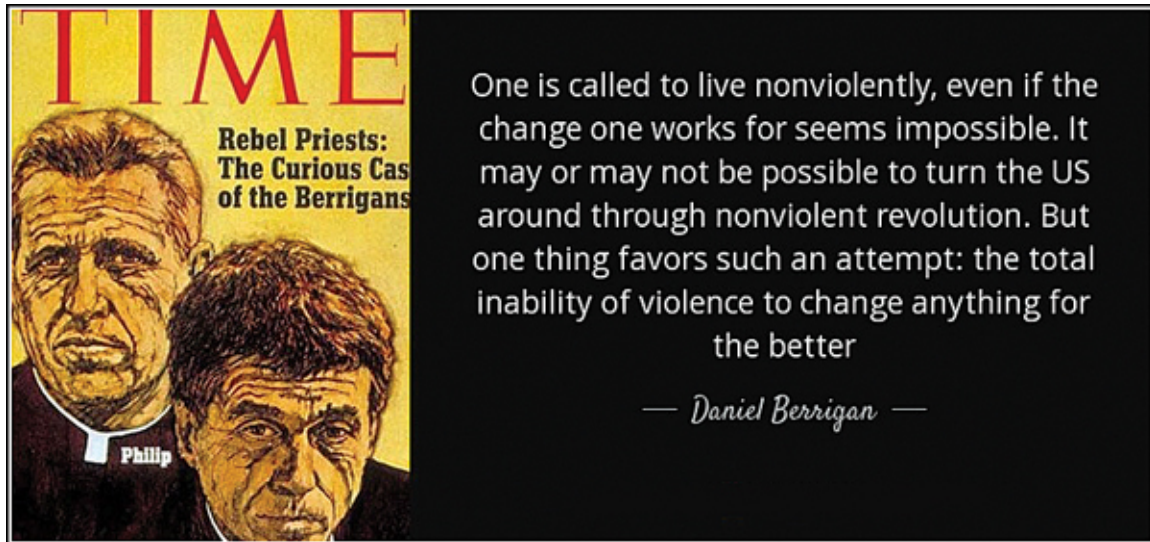


## EPISODE FIVE: Daniel Berrigan's Reverence for Life



Daniel Berrigan, S.J. (1921-2016) was one of the best known of the radical resisters to the Vietnam War. Together with his brother Philip, also a Roman Catholic priest (Josephite), he was a leading figure of civil disobedience. In 1965, in collaboration with the Lutheran theologian Richard John Neuhaus and the Jewish Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, he founded Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam, one of the first publicly organized anti-war organizations and a harbinger of the interfaith peace movement that was to drive much of the war resistance. They were soon joined by Martin Luther King, Jr., Harvey Cox, William Sloane Coffine, Thomas Merton, and Reinhold Niebuhr.

Berrigan later became infamous as one of the Catonsville Nine, a group of Catholic priests and lay persons who in 1968 burned draft cards with homemade napalm in Catonsville, Maryland. Following the protest, the group issued a statement which said in part:

We confront the Roman Catholic Church, other Christian bodies, and the synagogues of America with their silence and cowardice in the face of our country's crimes. We are convinced that the religious bureaucracy in this country is racist, is an accomplice in this war, and is hostile to the poor.

Convicted of defacing government property, Berrigan went into hiding and ended up on the FBI's "Ten Most Wanted" list. He was eventually apprehended, and spent two years in prison.

Like Martin Luther King, Jr., who made the link in his own thinking between the immoral violence of segregation and that of the Vietnam War, Berrigan connected these issues in his own mind through his reverence for life. His thinking was centered around a "consistent life ethic," which understood any assault on life, in whatever form, as essentially driven by the same assumption that life is not sacred: "I see an 'interlocking directorate' of death that binds the whole culture.

That is, an unspoken agreement that we will solve our problems by killing people in various ways; a declaration that certain people are expendable.”



As a Jesuit, Berrigan held a conviction that sustained opposition to injustice must be grounded in deep spiritual conviction such as this reverence for life. Speaking on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Catonsville demonstration, he remarked: “The short fuse of the American left is typical of the highs and lows of American emotional life. It is very rare to sustain a

movement in recognizable form without a spiritual base.”

In a telling episode, Berrigan spoke out about the death of Robert LaPorte, a young Catholic Worker who self-immolated as a protest against the war in front of the United Nations building in November 1965. Since LaPorte’s death was regarded by the church as a suicide, Berrigan was forbidden by his superiors from commenting. But at a memorial service at Dorothy Day’s Catholic Worker House, Berrigan held that, “whereas suicide proceeds from despair and loss of hope, Laporte died in another spirit, where death is conceived of as a gift of life.” However misguided the act, Berrigan saw it as an offering of self so that others might live. This thinly veiled reference to Christ’s death infuriated his superiors. Berrigan was ostracized and quickly shipped out to Latin America by the Jesuit order (Patrick Henry, “Peaceful Solidarity,” *Commonweal* (January 24, 2018), and was allowed to return only after a national outcry.

Berrigan was also well-known as a poet, and perhaps it is appropriate for him to have the last word through one of his own poems, which reflects his commitment to defending his ethic of life at whatever cost:

## **SOME**

Some stood up once, and sat down.  
Some walked a mile, and walked away.

Some stood up twice, then sat down.  
“It’s too much,” they cried.  
Some walked two miles, then walked away.  
“I’ve had it,” they cried,

Some stood and stood and stood.  
They were taken for fools,  
they were taken for being taken in.

Some walked and walked and walked –  
they walked the earth,  
they walked the waters,  
they walked the air.

“Why do you stand?” they were asked, and  
“Why do you walk?”

“Because of the children,” they said, and  
“Because of the heart, and  
“Because of the bread,”

“Because the cause is  
the heart’s beat, and  
the children born, and  
the risen bread.”

