

An Interview with Jim Forest

by Danny Sullivan

In 2017, *At Play in the Lion's Den* was published to much acclaim. Jim Forest's biography of the Jesuit priest Daniel Berrigan was his third in a trilogy of biographies of outstanding American Catholics, the other two being Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day.

I recently interviewed Jim Forest by videolink at his home in Alkmer, Holland. I began by asking him whether he identified a common strand in the lives of Merton, Day and Berrigan.

JF: They were all devout Catholics. They lived disciplined spiritual lives. The Eucharist was central to their lives and none more so than Dorothy Day. They all paid close attention to the New Testament and the Gospel of Christ.

DS: The way Merton, Day and Berrigan lived out their spiritual lives was very challenging to others, especially some of their fellow Catholics. Why do you think that was?

JF: Wherever you stand politically, left, right or centre, the New Testament is radically challenging. It calls you to love your enemies, to forgiveness and to be a peacemaker. These are the essential elements of the Gospel, and to try and live them out can be prophetic as well as challenging. Merton, Day and Berrigan were disturbing to others by their focus on the heart of the Gospel.

DS: The 60s and 70s in the United States were decades of war, the Vietnam War, and protests against it. Merton, Day and Berrigan, in their lives and writings, were at odds with the politics of war and even at odds with the Church at times. What was this saying to the wider world?

JF: Merton, Day and Berrigan were in tune with peacemaking when the Church was not. In many ways the Church across the world reflected the institutions of Government and aspects of colonialism and nationalism. The prophetic tradition of the Early Church was no longer prominent, nor the Christian belief that we do not kill our enemies, we do not dominate others, but work to convert others to the values of the Gospel.

DS: Uniquely you worked with all three: Merton, Day and Berrigan. What was that like?

JF: Dorothy Day was a key figure for me. When I left the Navy I joined the Catholic Worker movement which she led. At that time I was aware of Thomas Merton but not Dan Berrigan. Dorothy Day encouraged me to write to Merton, who was a contributor to *The Catholic Worker* newspaper. She also took me to a meeting with Dan Berrigan. I became a close friend of all three. I was writing letters to Merton as I was co-editing *The Catholic Worker*. I received a chapter of his book *New Seeds of Contemplation*, a chapter entitled 'The Root of War is Fear', and Dorothy Day asked me to get it ready for publication – to add sub-heads and so forth. I couldn't quite believe I was being asked to do this at this stage in my life. It proved to be an important text in Merton's life. It got him into a lot of trouble with the head of his Order as he stood out against nuclear weapons from a theological position.

DS: How did your lifelong commitment to peace and peace activism come about?

JF: I was initially a meteorologist with the Navy, and my unit worked on weather prediction. My unit did the weather prediction for the invasion of Cuba in 1961. When I realized what my Government was doing, and lying about it, I was shocked. I took part in a silent peace vigil outside the CIA offices in Washington, but I wore civilian clothes. I was in trouble for doing this and was discharged from the Navy as a conscientious objector. By that time I had read the autobiographies of Merton and Day.

DS: You took part in non-violent protests against war, and served time in prison for this.

JF: Yes, I served a number of short sentences and then was given a thirteen-month sentence for burning draft papers. The hard part was that my six-year-old son Ben was nearly 1000 miles away from the prison while I was serving my sentence. At his Sunday School they were talking about Paul and Silas being in prison for their beliefs, and Ben did a drawing of me behind bars with my hands in the air and said, 'My Dad is in jail right now.'

DS: When in prison you received a package from NASA which the Governor initially refused to let you have. What was that about?

JF: Initially the Governor would not let me have it as NASA was not on my 'approved list of correspondents'! However, I argued my right to have it and was given it. It was a photo of Earth taken from space and sent to me by one of the astronauts who had just been on the first mission to the moon. Apparently he had followed press reports of my trial and had been struck by my saying we all live at one address, the Earth. I kept the photo

in my cell and have it to this day. It was sent to me only days after the moon mission returned. It probably reached the White House only a day before it was sent to me!

DS: You have campaigned for peace all your life and still do. What continues to motivate you and not give in to despair when you see the wars and violence around the world still?

JF: Trying to centre my life on the Eucharist. Life for me is preparing for, participating in and thanksgiving for the Eucharist. It's a readiness to believe that the body and blood of Christ redeems you. I learned this specifically from Dorothy Day. When I think of Dorothy Day I think of her on her knees in prayer. Sometimes I have tantrums with the Church and I get disappointed with it. I go on strike but I can't last long as I need the Eucharist. I have learned that neither the Church nor myself are what we are called to be.

DS: You are a member of the Orthodox Church now.

JF: I didn't leave the Catholic Church. It is simply that I am eucharistically centred in the Orthodox Church. Or as I sometimes joke, that I am on loan to the Orthodox Church. I find myself on the bridge that connects the two. I went to Russia in the 1980s in an effort to help create doors in what was then called 'the iron curtain' and ended up writing two books about religious life in what proved to be the last years of the Soviet Union. It was a life-changing experience.

DS: Pope Francis on his visit to the United States made reference to Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day; and Day's granddaughter, Kate Hennessy, has written a biography of her to (in her words) rescue her from being hijacked as a saint. What did you make of that?

JF: I have read Kate's excellent biography. I love it. It is a very honest portrait of the complicated relationships that exist between a mother and daughter. Dorothy Day was not perfect and she was not a perfect mother. To be holy is not the same as being perfect.

DS: The issues of war and peace, and racial and social justice, were all key in the lives of Merton, Day and Berrigan, and all those issues are still around today. Have we learned nothing as a human family?

JF: A great danger today is the facility with which people dehumanize each other. You can see this across the world. Yet when I spent three months teaching at the Tantur Ecumenical Institute near Jerusalem, for example, I met Israelis and Palestinians who were working together for peace. A minority, but an important minority, showing that, even in the

most challenging of situations, the voice for peace will not be silenced. Thomas Merton was prophetic in his writings in the 1960s about ecology, the obscenity of modern weapons and the dangers of unbridled technology. His writings had great influence on the Second Vatican Council.

DS: Thomas Merton met with and referred to the Buddhist Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh as his brother. You yourself met with him. Have you ever considered writing a biography of him?

JF: I don't know enough of Thich Nhat Hanh's early life to do a biography of him. But I have travelled widely with him at different times and learned so much from him. I have a lot of taped conversations with him and maybe should make a book from them. I helped with the publication of his first book on mindfulness.

DS: Finally, Jim, in 2014 you wrote a remarkable book called *Loving Our Enemies: The Hardest Commandment*.

JF: We need to ask why Jesus put so much stress on love and forgiveness. My attempt at answering the question is far from perfect, but I hope reflects its centrality to the Gospel. Loving anyone often involves forgiveness, but forgiveness is a very difficult concept. Love is a decisive factor. If you understand love in its New Testament usage it is anything but sentimental. Following Jesus Christ means caring for the life and well-being of the other person. The work of forgiveness is only possible if you understand love in the New Testament sense. If I kill another person, then killed alongside that person is myself. Recently in America they have been remembering the anniversary of the My Lai massacre when innocent Vietnamese villagers were slaughtered by American troops. Think of the psychological and spiritual damage those soldiers did to themselves. There are many damaged people in America as a result of such events during the Vietnamese War who are now in psychiatric hospitals or living rough on the streets. Countless former soldiers have killed themselves.

DS: Where do we find the prophetic voice today?

JF: In Pope Francis, certainly. I believe he is a gift of God to us. Like all of us he is not perfect, but he speaks with clarity and compassion, love and commitment to the poor and abandoned. And he has spoken out against the inhumanity of war and weapons of war.

Danny Sullivan is a former editor of the Merton Journal.