Berrigan at Carnell
Daniel Berrigan

The Reverend Daniel Berrigan, a leading antiwar activist, was a Jesuit priest who symbolized the growing religious opposition to the war. This talk, given at Cornell University, was published in 1968.

The question of the war is a very precious one to which I have given certain irreplaceable years of my life in my poetry and my relationship with others in all those things which define me. These are years I will not have again. I can’t really go back and say that I made a good or bad choice. I just chose! I chose to be here rather than elsewhere in the largest sense. So it is clear to me that I operate from a sense that all things are obscurely joined and that to be really at a point of human death or anguish or hope is to be at the center of the picture. Maybe this is the act demanded of us: to take one choice that includes many other choices.

The choice that my brother and I have made was, given the times and the Church, a choice of conflict, undoubtedly with our own communities and our own faith and the things we had grown up with. But this act resulted in a great communion with all sorts of other people, of other faiths and traditions. We found a larger meaning to being Catholic Christians. Neither of us found a serious temptation to leave our commitments in any of these absurd ways that others are speaking of. We probably have certain resources available to us which allowed us to get beyond our own needs. We didn’t need to be married—and I say this humbly, it’s just that we could operate as celibates. We were not in such revolt against authority that we could not communicate with it. We didn’t have any personal frenzy or revenge to work out.

The war is a nightmare and the only advantage my brother and I have is that our nightmare began earlier. It began four or five years ago. So, we are better prepared to live in this nightmare, not as nightmare figures but as men who declare that it is a nightmare and, therefore, can dissolve it. Let us begin living in reality once more. This requires what it required of any period of the Church where death is in command and where society is moving to exclude more and more people through jail or the army or exclusion from benefits.

The real news is that Rome is burning. The city in which we are asked to live is in flames. I am trying to get with a much bigger thing than this little churchy thing which has been proposed as a real thing. What I am trying to suggest is that neither the Church nor the State nor the University alone has been capable of dealing with the fact of death, mass extermination and nuclear overkill, the cold war and the despair of the developing peoples.

Christianity deepens in men without violating any area in which we are requested to
be human beings. Christianity does not say get the hell out of your profession or income or anything else. But it does place these things in question; which is exactly where they should be—in question.

We will try to expose our conscience to the Catholic community and listen. If they will respect us, we will go ahead. If they do not respect us, we will go ahead. But we will not cut ourselves off, though we will not foreclose the possibility of their cutting us off ....

I speak as a minority figure. I’ve always been one. I try not to be romantic or obsessive about it but that is where I am. Around me is a minority group whether Christian or Jewish or humanist or secular. We represent, perhaps, only two percent of the community. From the point of view of anything now operating in society that remains true. Mine is an embattled, impoverished minority. My brother is just out of jail; he is in official disgrace. He is a cleric facing trial in war time and I am with him. The Society of Jesus, which is my community, which I love very much, which is the source of almost everything I have ever learned and valued is silent and will probably remain silent.

When I was in jail in Washington in November, I asked myself where the members of my community were. Why didn’t a Jesuit come to see how I was or another member of the Catholic community? Why didn’t someone come and say, "Where is Berrigan? I don’t agree with what he is doing but he is my brother and, therefore, I must know how he is?" I look to my brothers in the Society for a communal effort toward redemption. But except for one priest, I was abandoned by the Society, and except for a fine Dominican chaplain, also by the Church. I was left to the community which grew up in that jail among the protestors—most of whom were not Catholics.

I don't want to make a great issue. I want to express my anguished longing, which I am trying to be faithful to, to remain a priest in the Church and my Order. To invite my Order to a deeper understanding of itself, of the dead-end it is encountering by identifying through its silence with the structures of power, the war structures. This momentary evidence of power has nothing to do with real history, which is to say, the real Church. It may be necessary to be evicted from the Jesuits in order to do this. I have faced this and it is quite tolerable to me. I do not have any turn-off point at which I must say that my conscience must come to terms with what is officially acceptable. I must take the very absurd risk of saying that I could die in disgrace and die at peace in the hope that something would come later.

For the Church, I must say in all honesty, I have already outlined the choices and I have deliberately ignored the Catholic campus. I have ignored it because I believe it is unhistorical and finished. I have hoped not to be insensitive to the values of the best of these campuses but I am profoundly convinced that the time has come for them to integrate and reform themselves and make their values available to those who are passionately interested in entering into communion with the purity and depth of the Catholic tradition. And who, I might add, desperately need this resource.
We are facing a mysterious kind of new form of the immanence of God with regard to young people of very deep sacrificial possibility. I don't know whether it is inevitably connected with one period, one war, one crisis; or whether the times are really forming people who can be ready for whatever is going to happen. But let us rejoice in what is here. And what is here is a minority, extremely precious and exciting and full of promise for humanity with the Church.