



Jonah House

Community - Nonviolence - Resistance

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Dominican nun does heavy time for non-violent action at a 'kairos moment in history.'

by Douglas Roche

Douglas Roche is a senator emeritus in Canada, former Canadian Ambassador for Disarmament, and author of The Human Right to Peace.

From the confines of her minimum security prison in Danbury, CT, Sister Ardeth Platte sends out a monthly newsletter, which makes its way to a host of friends supporting her anti-nuclear weapons protests. The August, 2004 letter quoted generously from my book, *The Human Right to Peace*, and a friend of mine sent it to me.

I read with amazement my own words, uttered by a person who believes so deeply in peace that she has gone to jail for her belief.

Although her civil disobedience actions preceded reading my book, the fact that somebody so brave would quote me filled me with a sense of humility.

I determined to meet Sister Ardeth Platte and wrote to her to say that I would be in New York City in early November and would like to receive permission to visit her. Ardeth wrote back, sending a Visitor Information form, which I duly filled out, affirming, among other things, that I have not been convicted of a crime.

Time went by and I heard nothing. When I arrived in New York, I called the Danbury prison, and an official said I could have a one-hour visit. It was only later that I learned that my written request had been denied. But, through the grace of God, there I was standing at the end of a long corridor watching an elderly woman, in drab olive-grey garb, walking past cells and then greeting me with a big smile. On Oct. 6, 2002, Ardeth Platte, with two other Dominican Sisters, Carol Gilbert and Jackie Hudson, snipped a single chain securing a lock on a fence in a farmer's field in northeastern Colorado. They walked to a missile silo cover housing a 355-kiloton Minuteman III nuclear weapon twenty times more powerful than the Hiroshima bomb, which can be triggered on fifteen minutes' notice.

The Sisters tapped on the missile rails with small hammers and poured four baby bottles of their own blood on the cement casing in a symbolic act to turn swords into plowshares. They prayed, sang hymns and sat down to await arrest, which came forty minutes after their illegal entry.

The government pressed sabotage charges and the three Sisters were convicted, receiving sentences of 33 months for Sister Carol, 30 for Sister Jackie and 41 for Sister Ardeth. An appeal was heard in October, 2004, but the results are not yet known.

Ardeth said at her trial: "Sisters Carol, Jackie and I believe that we had a responsibility to inspect, expose, and symbolically disarm this weapon of mass destruction to avert a crime of our government and uphold the laws of the United States, not break them. Don't people claim today that the citizens of

Germany should have blocked the trains carrying people to the crematoriums, dismantled the ovens, or done something to stop the mass murder of people by Hitler? How will future generations judge all of us?"

Ardeth and I sat at a small table in the recreation room, a guard about 20 feet away. I asked her for a message for the people I

reach in my work. "We are all one creation,"

she said. "If we do not stop violence and care for one another, we are all diminished. Nuclear weapons are the ultimate evil. We must hold the U.S.

accountable for dismantling nuclear weapons. They are instruments of murder."

She told me about the reflection group she has organized with other women prisoners. They read scripture and current affairs books together.

"I do a lot of contemplation. " I want to give my life to God for nuclear disarmament. I find that being in prison is a special ministry. I never regret imprisonment. It's a sacrifice, but I want to make the time sacred."

She spoke calmly and seemed to be at peace with herself.

This year, she observes her 50th anniversary as a Dominican and she spoke warmly about the constant support she receives from her community. Ardeth has

a long record as a social justice activist; she participated in sit-ins and marches against the Vietnam War. "We must stop teaching our young men in the military

to kill," she said, "it's so barbarous." She spoke movingly about the "burden" young soldiers now in Iraq are carrying as a result of the killing they have done.

"We are at a kairos moment in history," she said, meaning that at this turning point we have to decide whether to eliminate nuclear weapons before they eliminate humanity.

Nuclear weapons preoccupy her as they do me. But she is engaging in civil disobedience and suffering jail time for her belief while I lecture and write and work in the diplomatic arena to effect change.

I realized that we have different callings, so to speak. I abhor nuclear weapons, with their massive, indiscriminate power to kill, as much as she does, but I don't think I could do jail time for my belief. As a public official for so many years, I could not counsel breaking the law.

But does that mean I must oppose non-violent civil disobedience for a cause aimed at curing the world of evil? The fact of the matter is that it is governments who are breaking the laws of humanitarian warfare by entrenching nuclear weapons in their military doctrines. The nuclear weapons states, of which the U.S. is by far the most powerful, are doing exactly that. The International Court of Justice has ruled that the threat or use of nuclear weapons is illegal and stated clearly that nations must conclude negotiations for total elimination.

Yet U.S. doctrine affirms the possible use of nuclear weapons. Research is underway for a new "bunker buster" nuclear weapon. The domination of space with weapons is ahead.

The U.S. is not listening to the voices in the international community who assert that the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty is in danger of collapse because the nuclear weapons states insist on maintaining their arsenals. The proliferation of nuclear weapons is assured in such circumstances. The threat of nuclear terrorism is real.

So the actions taken by Sister Ardeth Platte and her colleagues, illegal as they may be, are designed to address an infinitely greater illegality, the threat to kill massively - people we do not know, who have not harmed us and who have as much right as we do to a peaceful life. When the Second Vatican Council said, in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, that the courage of those who openly and fearlessly resist laws designed for the extermination of peoples "merits supreme commendation," the Council may well have had people like Ardeth in mind.

It is the distortion of the word "peace" that Ardeth is calling attention to. The U.S. government thinks it can obtain peace by bombing people and conducting war, as the events in Afghanistan and Iraq have shown. It spends \$100 million a day to maintain a nuclear arsenal to dominate a world that cries out for food,

water, health and education. There are terrible wrongs in the world; that is what Ardeth's actions proclaim.

Maybe her appeal against the sabotage conviction will be granted. In any event, in a year or so, she will be free again. But her action - pouring blood on a nuclear weapons casing to protest a blasphemy against God - cannot be forgotten.

If the U.S. government remains impervious to the legitimate complaints of citizens that its possession of 13,633 nuclear weapons of all kinds is a threat to human security around the globe, then it must expect a continuation of civil disobedience to make the point.

Some, of course, consider Ardeth and her colleague's mere "idealists" who get in the way of national policies. But non-violent civil disobedience as practiced by Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King achieved impressive results. Who knows where self-sacrificing protests against the evil of nuclear weapons will lead?

Without a doubt, radical change in national and international politics is essential to reverse the present trend lines of the war culture. The poor and vulnerable of the world and those being killed in the endless parade of wars need someone to speak up on their behalf. Ardeth Platte is speaking up.

The guard stood impatiently by. What could I say to this valiant woman? Our eyes met for a moment, wordlessly. We each knew, without any more comment, that we had a job to do. She reached out to hug me.