Unmasking the lie and cover-up of military violence positions people of faith at borders, in courtrooms of justice, and, more frequently, in jail. In Latin America soldiers massacre and torture civilians using expertise learned at the U.S. Army School of the Americas (SOA) recently renamed the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHISC). To walk in solidarity with victims of violence in Latin American countries, nonviolent protestors place themselves at risk of arrest knowing probable consequences of prison time. Despite these personal risks women and men speak truth in word and action, echoing a call for justice in prayerful, nonviolent actions of solidarity. Jon Sobrino's theology from the perspective of the crucified people, those oppressed and terrorized through brutal human rights abuses, underscores those who call for dissent and transparency.

In United States vs. Kathleen Long, case number 4:02-M, my practical theology of dissent had a clear voice. I found the courtroom a suitable setting to proclaim God's justice and love, to witness to the radical teachings of Jesus. Being in a federal court, I articulated the impassioned preaching for indigenous people given in 1511 by Antonio Montesinos, O.P.; his spirit gave me strength and fortitude. Federal Judge G. Mallon Faircloth listened, dialogued briefly, and then sentenced me to ninety days in federal prison for criminal trespass on the U.S. Army Infantry Center, Ft. Benning, Georgia. Did I lose my case? Legally, I was found guilty after pleading not guilty. Spiritually, I was empowered and found many venues to preach, teach, educate, and share my witness of nonviolent dissent.

Like those at the gates of the SOA, U.S. citizens have engaged in nonviolent civil disobedience on key issues, demonstrating to stop U.S. military imperialism, to protest foreign policies with Colombia, to eliminate the use and production of nuclear weapons, and to object to Iraq sanctions and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. I will share here a reflection on my communal experience of civil disobedience and time in prison. The purpose of this action of dissent and its consequence of a prison sentence embodies a spiritual expression of solidarity with the crucified people, victims and survivors of violence. I write to underscore the necessity of solidarity and community through nonviolent dissent in proclaiming the radical Gospel of Jesus.
Increased harsh treatment by military

Motivated by testimonies of survivors of torture and disappearances in Latin America, I felt called to seek truth and uncover the lie of violence being perpetuated at the SOA. My experience exemplifies a simple yet regular escalation of violence toward nonviolent protestors by military police, thus implicating a sign of a larger violent world kept hidden behind the Ft. Benning gate. I crossed the line and entered the base at the gate of the fort on November 16, 1997, with 601 others; we were apprehended by the military police and given a ban and bar or ejection letter for one year; the military chatted with us and provided a buffet supper.

Years later, in 2002, I crossed the line for the fourth time. My affinity group of four women religious and I marched arm in arm down a side street and walked into a wooded area to go around a fence put up by the Army because of “high military alert.” This high military alert fence or gate was only closed the three-day weekend of our nonviolent vigil. We were part of a group of eighty-five who crossed the line. We were processed quickly by the military police, yet treated more strictly than in previous years. After processing, we were immediately turned over to U.S. marshals who put us in shackles, with chains around our waist, our wrists and ankles. The marshals transported us by bus to the local county jail and kept us overnight. We were required to pay a $500 bond to be released for trial. In January 2003 my trial resulted in a ninety-day prison sentence. For those arrested in November 2003 the bond was doubled to $1,000. The treatment was harsher. One protestors, Kathy Kelly, was thrown to the floor by military police, kneed in the back, and hognitied, with arms and feet behind her. I detail these few circumstances to show the increased oppressive treatment by the U.S. Army.

As people of faith protest military oppression in Latin America and the training at the SOA/WHISC, the military response tightens and is more oppressive. The fences, the bond money, the prison sentences, and harsher treatment indicate clear signs of violence and control. Violence is a method used by militaries to oppress and control civilians. This is clear in survivors’ accounts. Dianna Ortiz in The Blinded Eyes: My Journey from Torture to Truth courageously names her struggle to survive the oppression of torture and articulately names the maneuvers of perpetrators to deceive and demean. Her book is disturbing to read because it accurately depicts the violence system of control and domination along with the lie of deception. Ortiz’s story and those of other survivors deeply motivate those advocating justice. Protestors in nonviolent actions denounce military violence, bring the abuses to public scrutiny, and demand change.

Pekin Federal Prison Camp

Going to prison was neither my choice nor my goal, but I recognized it as a possible consequence of my actions. From April 8 through July 3, 2003, I lived at Pekin Federal Prison Camp near Peoria, Illinois, a low level security prison with 275 women. Entering prison each protestors chooses how to live the days and interface with the oppressive prison system. Some continue the “protest” mode; I chose my three months more as a time of contemplation and observation as a participant observer. I cannot deny that my fear escalated walking in the doors the first day. However, after these first twenty-four hours passed, and sensing I was in a safe place, I gradually settled into the prison routine. I was in a community of non-
violent female offenders who had many stories to tell.

Through this prison experience I recognized my companions as good women with a few bad experiences that put them in prison. Some were innocent victims of conspiracy laws, others victims of unwise choices and difficult relationships. I saw mothers in agony at being separated from their children, and trying to parent over the telephone. I observed the domination and indignity imposed by guards and work supervisors. It was an every-day experience to be aware of the abusive health care provided for the women. Many suffered unnecessary pain because prescribed medicines were denied them. Tragedy after tragedy happened within only a three month time due to the medical personnel ignoring human need. I was most aware of the community developed by small groups of women providing security and companionship. Among the inmates I witnessed compassion and care. Clusters of women in need worked together and sustained each other. My brief time gave me a glimpse of the oppressive military style prison system that demeans rather than rehabilitates.

I left Pekin prison being in solidarity with a whole new group of women.

A spiritual call to community and compassion

Looking to the experience of other defendants in a January 2004 trial, Faith Fippinger crossed the line in 2003 also to protest the violence in Latin America; earlier in the year she had been in Iraq volunteering in a civilian hospital. She is a woman of faith, professing nonviolence as a way of life in the Buddhist tradition. In her court statement she said, “Because of a human caring for life on earth, a deep desire to decrease suffering rather than increase suffering and a belief in Gandhian principles of nonviolence, I am here today.

I am being tried today because in essence the U.S. government has made it a crime for me to want to protect innocent people from being killed.”

Don Beisswenger, another defendant, said, “Some may say that my actions are a travesty for a Presbyterian minister, and for an emeritus professor of Vanderbilt University. However I am a post-Holocaust Christian who learned that Christian nations can too easily ignore brutality and atrocities done in their name.”

Like theirs, my experience of nonviolent dissent is a theology of resistance, a spiritual experience placing myself in relationship to the victims and survivors. My belief in Jesus and my faith in the Christian community definitely sustain me and nourish me. In community, people of various faith traditions are all encircled with one another as a symbol and living expression of strength and solidarity. We mentor one another in peacekeeping, in nonviolence training, in facilitating groups, and in being prisoners of conscience. With respect for each individual, we seek justice and transformation of our world. Like Jesus picking grain on the Sabbath, we denounce that which is oppressive and call for radical change.

Unmasking the Lie

In Christ the Liberator, Jon Sobrino writes about revelation as triumph of God’s truth over lies, over the evil one. God’s truth must be made plain and the evil of the lie needs to be unmasked. Sobrino writes, “The problem I am indicating now is not just that of the murdering evil one but that of the lying one, who today takes the form of the ‘covering up one.’ A gigantic cover up, beside which Watergate looks insignificant, today hangs over the whole world. In other words, if Kant woke us up from the dream of dogma, we have still not awakened from our other
deeper and more dehumanizing dream—nightmare rather—of cruel inhumanity. Faced with this what is to be done?” (Sobrino, 2001). Those protesting militarism and violence, nuclear weapons and corporate greed are attempting to unmask the lie. They seek truth and transparency. The giant cover-up of U.S. foreign policy comes in expressions like, “promoting democracy” and “institute for security” and “drug war.”

Members of the faith community, the Church, are responding through nonviolent dissent to preach truth and compassion. Like Antonio Montesinos of 1511, protestors ask the government “Con que derecho?” [With what right?] (McGreal, 2003). Why the violent treatment of indigenous people, civilian people? And as Montesinos preached in his church, we ask members of the community, “Do you not understand this? How is it you sleep so soundly, so lethargically?”

With Sobrino, those going to prison in this act of protest expect the Church, the government, all people to wake up and see the “cruel inhumanity” and rise up for change. The massacres and brutal human rights abuses are not to be used as a few case studies but rather as true reality to shake the Church from unreality and denial. To unmask the lie of cover-up and the violence against humanity is to help take the “crucified people” down from the cross. This is the radical message of Jesus.

References


