

# MASS, CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE AND FATHER DANIEL BERRIGAN

Nina Bernstein Simmons

When my father wrote MASS in the late 1960's, the United States was fighting a brutal, senseless war in Vietnam. He and my mother, Felicia Montealegre, worked for the peace movement in various ways. They lent their names to myriad organizations, organized fundraising events, and marched at rallies. My father gave speeches and concerts to raise money and awareness. My mother worked with close friends to establish an organization called *Another Mother for Peace* which encouraged women to take an active role in eliminating war as a means to resolve disputes.

One of the events my mother organized was an evening in support of the Berrigan brothers, who had been arrested for allegedly plotting the kidnapping of secretary of state, Henry Kissinger. The event raised \$35,000 for the brothers' legal fund and cemented a friendship between my mother and Father Dan, as we came to call him. He stayed at our New York apartment for a week or so before surrendering himself to authorities and serving one of several terms in prison. I was seven years old at the time and didn't fully understand the importance of his presence. But I couldn't help feeling that this was no ordinary guest.

A word about my mother. She was brought up Catholic in Santiago, Chile. And even though she converted to Judaism when she married my father, she never truly repudiated her original faith. So when my father decided to write a piece centered on the Roman Catholic Mass for the inauguration of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, she became very involved.

One particular instance of her influence was a song by Chilean folk singer Violetta Parra. She was a favorite of our mother's and we listened to her records all the time. And this one particular song, *Versos por la Sagrada Escritura* ("Verses from the Sacred Scriptures") really got my father's attention — so much so that he borrowed it for *The Word of the Lord* in MASS. That song appears during the Epistles section of the piece, wherein letters from political prisoners and conscientious objectors are read alongside Epistles from the New Testament.

It is in the Epistles section that Father Dan's influence is most apparent. In the manuscripts, my father wrote out several letters for possible inclusion. Among them is one he ascribes to "Dan B." It reads:

*Dear brothers and sisters,  
A movement has meaning only in so far as it puts its gains to the side of  
human dignity and the protection of life, even of the lives most  
unworthy of such respect.*

This odd quote did not make it into the piece. Nor did my father follow Berrigan's advice to "Leave them with the militant mood. You yell at them and turn off the lights." The militant mood certainly informs the climax of MASS, with the congregation's demand: *DONA NOBIS PACEM!!* But the lights remain on; militancy and chaos yield to love and hope. MASS ends with some of the most achingly beautiful music my father ever wrote, the chorale *Almighty Father*.

As much as my parents admired Berrigan and his courageous acts of civil disobedience, they themselves were not militant. They could not advocate for destruction and violence. Wasn't that what they were fighting against?

More than fifty years after its composition, MASS resonates as poignantly as ever. War is far from obsolete, as we are so painfully reminded daily. Let us uphold the cause of peace with ardor and conviction.

**NINA BERNSTEIN SIMMONS** is the youngest daughter of Leonard Bernstein. After working as an actress for several years, first at the *American Repertory Theatre* in Cambridge, she turned to nurturing her father's legacy. Since 2008, Nina has worked as a nutritionist in underserved communities. She wrote the text for Theater Münster's program booklet and website.