



Jonah House

Community - Nonviolence - Resistance

Nun freed after serving 3 years for war protest

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By Liz Bowie Sun reporter Originally published December 23, 2005 Sister Ardeth Platte, 69, walked out of a federal prison in Danbury, Conn., yesterday morning filled with peace and joy, but not a bit of remorse for her crime.

"I feel very good about offering 41 months for peace in this world. So, every day has been sacred for me," she said.



The Dominican nun from Baltimore spent more than three years behind bars for cutting down a fence in front of a Colorado nuclear missile silo and pouring blood in the shape of a cross over the concrete in October 2002.

The act, committed with two other nuns, Jackie Hudson and Carol Gilbert, just before the invasion of Iraq, was an anti-war, anti-nuclear protest.

She and the other nuns have been arrested and jailed many times before - for weeks or months at a time - but they had never spent years behind bars.

The charges this time were felonies brought by prosecutors who said that the nuns weren't deterred by lesser sentences for civil disobedience and that trespassing and damaging government property deserved more serious penalties.

As she traveled back to Baltimore yesterday in a car driven by friends, Platte was still trying to adjust to freedom, still trying to find her equilibrium among the whizzing traffic and the "glorious nature all around," she said.

At the prison exit, she was greeted by supporters, reporters and friends from the Plowshares movement, founded more than 20 years ago by Baltimore activist Philip Berrigan, in whose Jonah House community Platte and Gilbert, 58, live.

Plowshares attacks federal installations on a regular basis in symbolic acts. The sisters say they weren't committing criminal acts at the silo because they were following international law, which considers nuclear weapons to be illegal.

The roots of Plowshares go back to the Vietnam War era when Berrigan, a priest, led the Catonsville Nine in setting aflame a small pile of draft records in the parking lot of the Catonsville Selective Service office.

Back in Baltimore yesterday waited Platte's lifelong friend, Gilbert. They had not seen each other since they were separated and sent to different prisons more than two years ago.

Gilbert had been freed in May and was relishing the release of the last of the three nuns who took part in the incident at the silo. Hudson was released in March and is in Washington state.

But the three could face more time in prison, depending on a U.S. District Court judge's ruling that they now await.

The nuns have refused to pay the government restitution of \$3,052.75 for destroying property - a portion of a chain link fence - and the cost of cleaning the blood off the silo.

As one of their lawyers, Walter L. Gerash, says: "They refuse to pay any money to a war machine."

Gerash has filed a petition asking that the judge count toward the restitution the many hours of community service the nuns have done since they were arrested.

Gilbert knitted in prison - socks, scarves and lap robes for the poor and elderly in nursing homes in West Virginia, where she was incarcerated. Platte worked as a chapel clerk helping to put together interdenominational services for women of many faiths. She also refused the pay she would have gotten for her work, which would have reduced the restitution.

And many people have contributed money on the sisters' behalf to after-school programs, to the Red Cross, to peace organizations, soup kitchens and other groups since their arrest.

In all, the contributions and their community service amount to nearly \$600,000, said Gilbert. That, their lawyers argue, should be enough to have the judge rescind the restitution.

But the U.S. attorney's office in Denver filed a brief last week saying the nuns should be required to make the payment.

"The criminal conduct of the defendants caused a monetary loss to the government. The purpose of the restitution is to reimburse the government," said Jeff Dorschner, a spokesman for the U.S. attorney's office.

Gerash hopes that the judge will rule before Christmas: "We are waiting for Christian charity."

As Dominicans, the sisters believe that they must preach the truth, Gilbert said. And so they believe their actions are a way of showing the world that nuclear weapons must be beaten into plowshares, she said.

"I don't regret one minute of it ... trying to stand up to the massive buildup of weapons of mass destruction," Platte said. "I must work for the rest of my life. I feel deeply that we need to establish new kinds of ways to relate to God's people in the rest of the world. And it shouldn't be through bombings and killings."

For now, Platte is enjoying the time she can spend with her friends. "It has made me want to leap for joy to be back with them," she said.

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