News

Plowshares activist Clare Grady speaks at the Los Angeles Catholic Worker on Oct. 3, 2018. (Mike Wisniewski)

by Eric Martin

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Clare Grady is a longtime Catholic Worker and peace activist who now faces the possibility of more than 21 years in jail for her participation in the Kings Bay Plowshares action. Despite that, Grady said in a recent interview that she sees

"cause for rejoicing" in the current political moment.

On April 3, 2018, Grady and six other Catholics entered Kings Bay Naval Base in Georgia to symbolically and nonviolently disarm nuclear Trident submarines, which Grady says are used as "a cocked gun to enforce systems of white supremacy, global capitalism and global domination."

The Kings Bay Plowshares are seen April 4, 2018, before they entered the Naval Submarine Base Kings Bay in Georgia to protest nuclear weapons. From left: Clare Grady, Patrick O'Neill, Elizabeth McAlister, Jesuit Fr. Steve Kelly, Martha Hennessy, Mark Colville and Carmen Trotta. (CNS/Kings Bay Plowshares)

The seven hammered on a shrine for nuclear missiles, painted biblical messages, and carried an indictment against the federal government for crimes against peace.

All seven were found guilty on felony charges. Liz McAlister received time served and the remaining six expect their sentencing dates on Oct. 15 and 16 might be delayed.

Grady comes from a family of peacemakers. In our interview, she spoke about her parents, Teresa and John Peter Grady. Her father was a veteran Catholic activist who ran for Congress in 1968 and participated in a 1971 draft board raid in Camden, New Jersey.

The group, later known as the Camden 28, aimed to destroy 1-A draft files during the Vietnam War and were eventually acquitted of seven felony charges in a high-profile trial. Clare's sisters, Ellen, Mary Anne and Teresa, and her brother, John, have been protesting for decades, including Plowshares actions and blocking operations at drone bases.

Clare was part of a Plowshares action at Griffiss Air Force Base in New York as well as part of the St. Patrick's Day Four action in 2003, where Catholics (including her sister Teresa and their brother-in-law Peter De Mott) poured their blood at a military recruiting center.

Following is my interview with Grady, edited for length and context. She spoke from Ithaca, New York, and discussed the Kings Bay action, the current political moment, and her religious motivations.

***NCR*: Why have you pushed to link this movement that focuses on nuclear weapons with white supremacy?**

Grady: It was my intention that when we got together to plan the Kings Bay Plowshares action, we would include Dr. [Martin Luther] King's triplets [connecting racism, militarism and materialism]. And I just made a personal commitment that I wasn't going to do that action unless I could do a little more justice to those triplets. And thankfully, the community was willing to embrace that.

But I'm like a neophyte in this work. I'm glad for all the help we can get from others who bring their experience, strength and hope in this undoing of white supremacy. I just listened to a 1982 talk in New York where white people asked the Black speaker, "Why are Black people here so slow at getting on board with nuclear disarmament?"

And boy did he blast them, saying: "Where have you been in getting on board with our lives that are being taken all the time?" It was beautiful.

> "All of Isaiah is near and dear to my heart. Every line I read is like, 'Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa! Do people *read* this?' "
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Do you see the Plowshares movement as connected to the anti-statue movement sweeping the country?

Of course! It's people seeing the power of symbol! The power of what those statues represent and the power of the symbol of taking them down ourselves. *That* is beautiful. That is just simple and beautiful and it's such a movement, it's opening doors for the next one.

Jesus didn't start an imperial religion that blesses the imperial powers and keeps white people and white statues as the epitome of holiness and virtue.

The Plowshares movement is based on a quote from Isaiah. Why do you, personally, choose to focus on the prophets?

Well, to be honest, before the first Plowshares action [in 1980] and going to that trial, I don't think that line from Isaiah was really familiar to me, even though I must have heard it many times. It took on new meaning. That happens when anybody enfleshes any sacred text or sacred call.

So, why call in the prophets? Because my community was enfleshing them. I got to have a new relationship with that prophetic call. I got to practice it, thanks to the hospitality and fidelity of Jonah House [in Baltimore] and Dorothy Day House [in Washington, D.C.], and then being present at others' trials.

From whom so much has been given, much is expected. What am I going to sit on all that? So, there you are.

What parts of the Bible are central to you at the moment?

All of Isaiah is near and dear to my heart. Every line I read is like, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa! Do people *read* this?"

What about people?

Well, our mother and our father. My mom always had Thomas Merton next to her bed. The ultimate reality of truth that he talks about, it's like, "*Whooom*!" It takes you out.

But then just all the people whose lives and words ring true. Angela Davis, Fannie Lou Hamer, Dorothy Day, Anne Montgomery, Liz McAlister. When Phil and Dan [Berrigan] would talk, I could be transfixed. Dan especially, even two sentences sometimes when he would speak.

I remember when he unpacked the Isaiah 2:4 passage and I just — you know, there's something about hearing it shared by somebody who's contemplated and lived it in such a way.

Dan said the family can be a roadblock to peace work. Your family seems to be the opposite, a springboard. Why?

When it came to our parents, our dad opted to do organizing and so forth, but our mom wasn't risking arrest while we were young. She did later. So, we had some disruption but our mother wasn't gone. When we chose to do these actions, she chose to support us.

> '[Mary] knew exactly what the price was going to be when her son chose that path. And she didn't run away but accompanied him to the bottom of the cross.'
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As a mother, it's easier for me to do an action than to imagine my child going through that wicked system. But my mother never said, "You're hurting your family," or, "You're hurting your economic status." Obviously! We had none.

In a women's Bible study in Ithaca, I realized Mary gave the biggest sacrifice because she said yes to the hardest thing. It's one thing to say it for yourself, but for your *child*. ... She knew exactly what the price was going to be when her son chose

that path. And she didn't run away but accompanied him to the bottom of the cross.

Merton says Mary is the mediatrix of grace. And I really believe that's why, because she's showing us what God's will looks like in real time, in a militarily occupied place, where your love gets so big for your son that you're going to let him do God's will even if it means you'll see that cross.

Is it the intention of the Plowshares movement to confront the church?

Because I choose to see nonviolent direct action in a sacramental way, I see it as confronting myself first and foremost. I didn't disarm that Trident to confront the government or the church, but to call myself to accountability, and to manifest a new relationship with the weapon that enforces this filthy rotten system, which kills every day in my name.

After the trial, you went on the court steps and said, "We are only as sick as our secrets. This disarming process is revealing the weapons that are ours." And you pointed to your heart. It seemed like you were talking about collective possession of weapons but also something more personal.

Yes, all those dimensions for me. It's the full spectrum. It's the secret of the weapons, the secret of the systems that those weapons enforce that we don't even know the half of what is hidden around the violence of those systems. And then, when we take up these Plowshares sacramental prophetic actions, we do it in community.

In that form, we encounter and engage in the work of revealing our own stuff. Right? To each other and to ourselves. It's very challenging! It's very hard work. You sometimes want to run away from it.

> 'We have to trust and believe in something greater than what we can measure with our little numbers.'
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What is it you're confronting in yourself?

Complicity, I guess. And it doesn't work out like a two-plus-two equation. It's not like, "Oh, I checked that box I'm done with complicity," or, "I'm complicit beyond repair if I don't do this." It's not like that.

There's a violence that Merton talks about, and it's a very humbling process addressing it. Ego and violence are cunning, baffling and powerful, and you might think that you're on the right side of history.

Nope! You didn't do this action to feel good, and even though there's a lot of community and love and redemption, this is not you getting a free pass out of humanity. This is more like having your humanity revealed. But in a good news sort of way. There's nothing to lose but our chains, ultimately. What can be revealed can be healed, that's how I see it.

But I want to go back to your question about the church because that's really challenging me. I feel like, well, the Kings Bay Plowshares action of nonviolent symbolic disarmament *was* also part of a conversation and challenge to my church. And not a challenge repudiating my church, but it's invitational.

Does getting results matter to you or is witnessing to the truth enough?

For one thing, I would say get out of the colonized framework of binaries. It just doesn't exist. That's my 61 years of life experience. I could not put those two in a neat box next to each other. They are not separate and they are not opposed to each other, they energize each other. So, I'll start with that.

Look at the Mass. Have we ended sin? Have we ended oppression? And we still say, "Remember me when you do this." We have to trust and believe in something greater than what we can measure with our little numbers.

But experientially, I'm just going to take one little example. Leading up to "shock and awe" [the invasion of Iraq in 2003], there were so many people on the street. A million came out in New York. Millions came out around the world to say, "*No*."

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Did that stop it? If it didn't, was that all useless? I'll say no for myself. No, it wasn't useless. Every time we come out on the street, every time we take any action, it is like going on the ark. That's how I see it.

At your trial, when you were pronounced guilty, everybody started singing, "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice." You're facing the possibility of a 20-year sentence. Does it really feel like a time for rejoicing?

Well, you know, you and I have this experience of being Irish, and joy and grief come side by side. Tears and rejoicing. Those two things are not opposite. They're like close cousins. And I can really vividly remember when our dad was brought in with his co-defendants to the Camden courthouse [in 1973] and they had them all in chains, shackled, their legs and their waists.

But [she laughs] they were singing Irish rebel songs with a lot of *joy*. And dad was facing 45 years. So, is it time for lamenting or rejoicing? It's always time for both.

This is actually a historic moment, it's never been seen before in my lifetime, and I want to say it comes on the heels of centuries of so much suffering and sacrifice that these doors are open even an inch more than ever before to talk about Black lives, to talk about colonization, to talk about systems of oppression in a way that we're not used to.

People for generations have been living it and groaning for this shift. Right now, there's this incredible moment. And does it mean everything's better and there's no suffering? No, but there's so much possibility right now, people out on the street. That's cause for rejoicing.

[Eric Martin teaches at the Center for the Study of Religion at UCLA.]

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