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WHY I KNELT AND PRAYED: A STATEMENT CONCERNING CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

Sister Mary Pat White

On March 22, 2003, three days after President Bush declared that the preemptive strike on Iraq by the United States had begun, I entered Vandenberg Air Force Base, in a peaceful, prayerful, and—in the tradition of Gandhi—non-violent act of “non-cooperation” with our government’s attack on Iraq. I chose to act out my non-cooperation by trespassing on base property. I crossed a green line painted there as a line of demarcation meant to separate the civilian world from the military one. Quietly, I defied the military. I walked over the line. I knelt and prayed.

This decision was not made lightly; rather, I was conscience bound. Vandenberg Air Force Base was surely an appropriate venue for my action because it was being used as a center for the dissemination of information, via military satellites, to guide missiles and bombers to their targets in Iraq—killing thousands, including innocent civilians, many of whom were children.

I knew myself to be conscience-bound to take a stand against this invasion, which on the basis of the “just war” theory adhered to by Christians over the centuries, was without doubt an unjust and immoral war.

Furthermore, I took my stand in union with millions of people around the globe who were protesting this action by the United States and naming it for what it truly was: arrogance, military domination, and greed. Sadly, these voices of wisdom and truth were ignored by an administration intent upon having a war. And as the ensuing months have clearly shown, weapons of mass destruction, the eradication of which was the primary reason given for our attack, did not exist there.

Our president can send our youth off to kill (and to kill by the thousands!) and be killed. He and his administration can mislead the American people and the international community about the need for a preemptive strike upon the sovereign nation of Iraq. And he can do all of this with impunity and without being held accountable to the American people, and indeed the world, for his actions.

How strange it is that a peaceful, non-violent protest is cast as unpatriotic and wrong.

The issue here actually lies beyond an act of civil disobedience. There is as well the question of how the legal system deals with our civil right—indeed our duty—in a democracy to protest what is clearly an unjust and immoral action on the part of our government. For me, the question is this: How do we live morally in an immoral world?

Throughout my life as an educator—as a principal of elementary schools and as a campus minister for university students—I have always taught my students to live their lives with integrity, to stand up against injustice, to act according to their consciences.

It was the moment for me to live the counsel I have given.

Regardless of how my action is judged by others, it is my conviction that when my government acted as egregiously as it has in attacking Iraq, it was required of me to take an action which, though perhaps illegal, is morally justified. As Socrates stated when on trial before the Athenians, “I owe a greater obedience to God than to you.”¹ Surely his statement applies to me as well.

My companion and I, having crossed the green line in Vandenberg’s roadway, knelt and prayed:

*We prayed on the holy land of the Chumash People that has been desecrated
by the war projects developed on the base.*

*We prayed for all those who would die in combat, both American
and Iraqi—for all life is sacred.*

*We prayed for the innocent: the elderly, women, and children terrorized
by our attacks, and who would die at our hands.*

*We prayed for our country because as patriotic Americans, loyal to the
principles of democracy, we believe in diplomatic means
of achieving peace and believe that war is an
unthinkable option.*

We prayed to re-consecrate the whole earth for peace.

When I knelt in prayer at Vandenberg Air Force Base, I did so waiting in hope—waiting in hope that God’s love in the end would be greater than the darkness and fear that surrounded us, even as the boots of the armed guards in full riot gear thundered

down upon us, creating a terrifying sound surely meant to intimidate. I also did so responding to a strong personal call to live out the Gospel imperatives of compassion, forgiveness, and peace and to deplore with my whole being the unspeakable horror descending upon the people of Iraq.

I took the action that I did, inspired by Jesus, whose last words to his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane were, "Put down the sword! Those who live by the sword die by the sword."² And so, the message needs to be proclaimed whether it is received or not. And the message is that God is not a God of war but a God of peace.

In the words of Isaiah the prophet, "Let us beat our swords into plowshares."³ I chose, therefore, to take a stand for peace. Today, I continue to take my stand for peace. And I live with the consequences, one of which is a sentence of three years supervised probation for my act of civil disobedience. That is, almost, a small matter. The greater anguish is over the struggle to live morally in an immoral world.

Toward this end, I kneel and pray. ☺

Notes

1. "Socrates on Trial" found in *The Last Days of Socrates*; Penguin Books, Baltimore, Maryland. P. 61.
2. Mt 26:52-53 (Jerusalem Bible)
3. Is 2:4 (Jerusalem Bible)