

Martha Hennessy has drawn closer to the Church in her later years, and to the work of her grandmother, Dorothy Day. In an era of unrest she returned to activism – and to the ideals of the Catholic Worker movement – risking decades in prison / By MADOC CAIRNS

A revolution of the heart

YOU COULD call it a miracle. Desert turns to glass; air turns to fire; soil into dust. Wind carries the dust north, away from the desert, to green pastures and the cities of man. The wind keeps some of the dust, sweeping it out to the great blue ocean. Some dust is left to the cities, settling on pavement and rooftop and parkland; some finds a way to the warm bodies of the creatures who set it in motion. It sits there, the dust that was once a desert. After a little while, it begins to kill.

The year is 1955: yet another summer of open-air nuclear tests, Operation Teapot, has concluded successfully, according to the United States government, assuring the public that the thermonuclear bombs set off in Nevada present no threat to human life or health. The government is wrong.

In June of that year, Dorothy Day is arrested along with 10 other Catholic pacifists protesting a different kind of test. Operation Alert expects the desert's arrival in the city: the atom bombing of US population centres. Day, by this point a 25-year veteran of social activism, calls Operation Alert's compulsory air raid drills "a preparation of the collective mind for war". For refusing to participate in the drill, Day is tried, found guilty, and given a suspended sentence. A year later, there's fresh dust on new winds, and she will do it all again.

A month after Day's protest at New York's City Hall, Martha Hennessy is born: Day's seventh grandchild, the fifth daughter of her only child, Tamar. Hennessy will spend most of her life on the Vermont farm she grew up on, raising children, working the land, building a career as an occupational therapist. Sixty-three years after the summer of fire and sirens she was born into, she walks into the middle of the Kings Bay naval base in Georgia, home to dozens of nuclear-armed submarines, takes out a baby bottle and pours her own blood on the ground. When I ask her where it started, she talks about her grandmother, and the tests, and the bombs. It's in my body, she says. She talks about the dust.

Her activist group – Kings Bay Plowshares – is founded, she tells me, on Isaiah 2:4: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." In a world of injustice, Isaiah predicted the entry of a just God into human history; judging wisely, the Messiah would call back Israel from the brink of destruction. He would bring peace to a world at war.



Martha Hennessy

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On the fiftieth anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King in 2018, Martha Hennessy and six other Catholics entered Kings Bay naval base, cutting through barbed wire and a padlocked gate, carrying banners and hammers and baby bottles of their own blood. They split into three groups. Hennessy's moved to the Strategic Weapons Facility Atlantic, the command centre of the US' nuclear-armed Trident submarines.

Each of the US' 14 such submarines carries 24 ballistic missiles, each missile in turn comprising eight separate warheads: 192 bombs, each sufficient to kill a city. One Trident, the Plowshares action statement claimed, could destroy life on earth. When we took the message of non-violence to the heart of this kind of power, Hennessy tells me, we were bringing the Gospel into a place of sin. She helped hang banners from buildings; others in the group hammered at a monument celebrating nuclear missiles; all spilt their blood on the ground; all prayed for an end to "the permanent arms economy of the American empire".

All seven were found guilty at trial in October 2019. Conspiracy; trespass on naval property; depredation of government property; destruction of property on naval installation: the defendants faced over 20 years in prison. Religious-freedom defences were not accepted by the judge. A sacrament makes visible the invisible, Hennessy says to me: something real and true that, nevertheless, can't always be seen.

In the 1945 nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, 210,000 Japanese citizens died. Dorothy Day was one of the few Americans to condemn the attacks. If we hope "they are vapourised, our Japanese brothers – scattered, men, women and babies, to the four winds", she wrote in the *Catholic Worker*, perhaps we'll "feel them in the fog of New York on our faces, feel them in the rain". Perhaps, she said, we'll breathe their dust. When Dorothy Day died on 29 November 1980, the total number of nuclear warheads globally had reached somewhere north of 50,000, with a destructive power to match. One million Hiroshimas.

After Day's death, Hennessy didn't set foot in the New York Catholic Worker house for nearly 25 years. It was too painful, she says; it can be hard to have such a powerful person in your family. It can be hard to lose them. Hennessy remembers her as a constant force in her early years. Talking, praying, instructing – her grandmother made a profound impression.

Day's case for sainthood is gathering speed. Her daughter and grandchildren had and have, however, complicated relationships with the Church. Angry and alienated by Catholicism in her youth – particularly by the institutional Church's treatment of women and children – Hennessy ceased practising her faith as a young adult. After her first spell in prison, for protesting a nuclear power plant in the Seventies, and the death of her grandmother, she took a step back from activism, too.

FOR 25 YEARS, she "hid out in Vermont", living and working on the farm where she's lived since the age of two. Unlike her sister Kate – "the wanderer" – the younger sister is rooted in a particular place, with particular people. Her husband built their house from scratch: she tends crops she planted with her own hands. It makes her journey from an "idyllic" family life to risking decades in prison in the Kings Bay action all the more extraordinary.

That journey began in 2002, as the United States prepared for war. Asked to give a speech at her grandmother's induction to the American Women's Hall of Fame, Hennessy told the audience that if they wanted to honour her grandmother, they should be prepared to honour what she stood for. Explicitly attacking preparations for the war in Iraq divided listeners "down the middle".

Support came from an unexpected quarter. Darting out from behind her bodyguards, Justice of the Supreme Court Ruth Bader Ginsburg clasped Hennessy's hand to hers for

a brief, telling moment. She had spoken for those who couldn't speak; acted for those who couldn't act. Hennessy realised, she says, the gift – and the responsibility – she had.

On 19 March 2003, the United States' invasion of Iraq began. A "quick, clean war" turned into an internecine, grinding insurgency. And in spite of a complacent media – and an obsequious Catholic Church – the wind carried dark news to Vermont: torture, war crimes, extrajudicial executions and extraditions. As her government continued to throw money and lives into an unwinnable war, Hennessy threw herself into organising with groups like Witness Against Torture.

It was then, she says, "I began to explore my baptism". She felt something pulling her back: back to the Church, back to activism, back to her grandmother's work. In 2004, she returned to the New York Catholic Worker. On 8 November 2004 – Dorothy Day's birthday – the United States military burned Iraqis alive in the city of Fallujah. The use of white phosphorus, depleted uranium and thermobaric missiles in Fallujah is, in spite of vociferous denials by the US military, a matter of historical record. The long-term consequences of their use in a densely populated area are murkier. Years after 2004, Hennessy read how maternity wards reported children born with fused limbs; heart disease; brain damage; organs on the outside of their bodies. Other babies were born paralysed; without

hands, without eyes, without breath. No one could say exactly why this happened, or why it continued. But Iraqis talk about the long half-life of depleted uranium; the blood of those who lived near bases, choked with radioactive thorium. They talk about the dust.

"When it is said that we disturb people too much by the words 'pacifism' and 'anarchism,'" Dorothy Day once wrote, "I can only think that people need to be disturbed."

It all comes back to the Cross, Hennessy tells me: the horizontal line of human life; the vertical line of God's call: the crossing point of incarnation, discipleship. Of crucifixion. At their trial, the Plowshares Seven were denied the opportunity to make a "necessity defence" – law-breaking to prevent greater harm – refused the right to cite international law, barred from mentioning nuclear arms restriction treaties. At one point in the trial, a jury member asked the prosecution if Kings Bay was a base for nuclear weapons. They were told by the judge that such questions were irrelevant. The defendants talked about their motivation: the teachings of Jesus Christ. Jurors were instructed that such concerns weren't relevant to the business of the court.

It's not, Hennessy tells me, easy: the trials

and the charges, the jail time – she served two months before being granted bail, but others had to wait over a year – the way the state uses the legal process to break down people's self-respect, their connection to others. Going to jail and entering the courtroom was another crossing between the vertical and the horizontal: another witness to the love of God in a godless place.

It wasn't easy returning to Catholicism, either, she says. Her husband isn't practising, and the gulf between her grandmother's faith and what's preached from the average American pulpit made her return to the Church a long, lonely walk. I ask if she feels there's a parallel between her grandmother's solitary conversion to Christianity and her own. She does; but, she says, that solitude is itself part of a bigger picture: the vertical and the horizontal, the world and the kingdom, nature and grace.

You can't do this kind of work without community, Hennessy tells me. That means spiritual community, too. "Dorothy and Peter Maurin" – the Catholic Worker movement's co-founder, an itinerant French peasant – "told people they had to go to Mass every day, they had to pray. It's not possible otherwise."

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With a pope who doubts whether war is justified, the Church might finally be catching up to Dorothy Day

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Plowshares activists work to dismantle their own capacity for violence before they turn to the state. The Kings Bay action emerged from two years of life in community, discernment, prayer; for many participants, it had been building since Iraq. Even longer, in her case, Hennessy thinks. “It took 50 years,” she says, “for the seeds my grandmother planted to bear fruit.”

“We have all known the long loneliness,” Dorothy Day wrote in her autobiography, “and we have learned that the only solution is love.”

It all comes back to the soil, Hennessy says. The ideals of the Catholic Worker movement – self-sufficiency, community life, a return to the land – were lampooned as antiquated at the movement’s foundation. Even some Catholic Workers won’t subscribe to Dorothy Day’s vision of a “revolution of the heart”, a new society founded on dialogue, hospitality and prayer. But in an era of ecological crisis and social breakdown, the old ideas seem newly prescient. For Hennessy, they’re still the answer. Her action was part of it, the vertical meeting the horizontal once again. God, reaching down; humanity reaching out. The new social order, she tells me, starts with love.

HENNESSY WILL BE home in Vermont this winter – she splits her time between the farm and the Catholic Worker house in New York – and already she’s preparing for the avalanche of grandchildren due to descend on her farm at Thanksgiving and Christmas. A new one arrived this year: her ninth. Somewhere on the farm there’s a grape vine she planted with her own hands, decades before.

She is still serving her sentence – she got three years and 10 months, in the end – but after some time in a halfway house, she’s out of state custody. So are her co-defendants. The state’s not giving them an easy time of it – Hennessy’s movements are circumscribed – but she’s hopeful about the future. Look at Black Lives Matter, she says: each new movement builds upon the last. And with a pope who publicly doubts whether any war could be justified, the Church might finally be catching up to Dorothy Day.

Kings Bay is still open, one of the largest and most expensive stockpiles of nuclear weapons in the world. There’s war, and rumours of war. There’ll be dust in the wind next year. “But we must remember; that more good is happening than we can hope for or imagine, all the time,” Hennessy said last year. “Christ is with us always.” The wind that carries the dust carries the spirit, too.

In 1980, at the very end of her life, Dorothy Day tried to explain the success – and the survival – of the Catholic Worker and found that she couldn’t. Without any plan or direction, the world changed around them. “It all happened while we sat there talking,” she said, “and it is still going on.” Those changes go on, all around the world, on altars and farms and nuclear submarines. Fear into love; swords into ploughshares; bread that’s just bread, until it’s not. You could call it a miracle. It’s still going on.