

A Man of Principle

John Scally is a regular contributor to the *Messenger* and recalls here the life of Fr Daniel Berrigan SJ, a well-known social advocate in the USA.

It is telling that Pope Leo XIV made one of his first comments as pontiff, on 9 May 2025, about mission: ‘These are contexts where it is not easy to preach the Gospel and bear witness to its truth, where believers are mocked, opposed, despised or at best tolerated and pitied. Yet, precisely for this reason, they are the places where our missionary outreach is desperately needed. A lack of faith is often tragically accompanied by the loss of meaning in life, the neglect of mercy, appalling violations of human dignity, the crisis of the family and so many other wounds that afflict our society.’

This year marks the 40th anniversary of my favourite film, the Oscar-winning *The Mission*. It is a challenging movie that explores the spiritual and the temporal, and the relationship between them, in a thought-provoking way. It contains moving images of despair, penance and redemption that are among the most evocative ever filmed. It offers a positive depiction of Catholic missionaries as selfless champions and defenders of indigenous peoples and their ways of life rather than as oppressors or imperialists. It begins and ends in martyrdom – in bearing witness, signed in blood.

Recently I spoke with the produc-

er of the film, the now Irish-resident David Puttnam. He told me that one of his most inspired decisions was to employ the famous Irish-American Jesuit Daniel Berrigan as a consultant on the movie.

A lifelong civil rights activist and anti-war protester, Berrigan even played a small role in the film. One of Berrigan’s tasks was to give a retreat to Jeremy Irons, husband of Irish acting royalty Sinead Cusack and Cork resident, which involved a crash course on the essence of Jesuit spirituality and prayer.

Lord Puttnam told me that Daniel Berrigan was one of the most impressive people he ever knew. He recounted his story. Berrigan was born in Virginia, Minnesota, in 1921, but his family moved to New York when he was five, where he spent most of his childhood. When he finished high school, he entered into the novitiate for the Society of Jesus, at the age of eighteen.

After his ordination as a priest in 1952, he spent a year in France where he met socialist and radical priests. When he returned to America, he took up a teaching position, but in 1963 he returned to Europe where he met French Jesuits who were speaking out loudly about



America's invasion of Vietnam.

When he returned to America, he founded the Catholic Peace Fellowship with his brother Philip. He claimed, 'One is called to live non-violently, even if the change one works for seems impossible. It may or may not be possible to turn the US around through non-violent revolution. But one thing favours such an attempt: the total inability of violence to change anything for the better.'

In 1968, Berrigan and eight comrades burned draft files using homemade napalm in a car park in Catonsville, Maryland. They became known as the Catonsville Nine and were imprisoned. Berrigan ended up serving two years in jail. Between 1970 and 1995 he spent nearly seven years in prison.

In 1980 Berrigan trespassed into a

nuclear missile facility where he and some followers damaged a warhead and poured blood over documents. In 1984 he began working in a hospital in New York City where he ministered to patients with AIDS. He spoke out against American military interventions around the world, particularly the Gulf War, and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

He was arrested for taking part in a demonstration at a naval museum in New York in 2006, at the age of 85. He died in 2016.

How does David Puttnam remember him? 'He was above all a man of principle with a hunger for justice. He had such wisdom and real integrity. I think he gave us all the blueprint for how to live properly today when he said: "You just have to do what you know is right."'