

MISSION TO HANOI, PART II

Daniel Berrigan

Sunday, February 11th. The whole day was passed in the company of a certain Colonel Lao, spit and polish, genial, a little self-conscious in his well-cut uniform. He was a Vietnamese representative on the war crimes tribunal and had worked for almost a year on the commission in Vietnam and had attended the Stockholm tribunal.

One six-hour exchange. Perhaps one should not dignify it by a word which does not express what we endured at ten-thousand miles remove from the military mind. Colonel Lao began by expressing, with typical Asian tentativeness, his understanding that we were perhaps quite well-acquainted with the history of his country leading up to the American invasion. Zinn was of course able to give an unqualified affirmative nod; I somewhat less surely. But no matter. The Colonel proceeded with a three-hour monologue on the basics of Southeast Asian history as these touched upon the Vietnamese since the first war of independence in 1945 and the strikes against the French headquarters in the major cities.

Zinn was as always my Old Testament example for patience and long-suffering. I used to steal glances out of the corner of my eye at Zinn, in order to reinforce my own failing patience. And I would see him glancing with every indication of profound interest and nodding his head as though the clichés and truths he was hearing were of the most profound character. It was only now and again, like landmarks of hope on a painted ocean, that a bit of humanity would force its way through and the colonel would forget the epaulets on his mind, thus: The colonel is from Hué. His mother is still there; he has had no news from her in ten years. "*C'est la drame de notre pays.*" . . .

(There followed a part of the interview which I shall try to summarize here. It truly brought the long

In February of this year Daniel Berrigan, S.J. of Cornell University and Howard Zinn, professor of government at Brandeis University, made a trip to Hanoi to obtain the release of three American prisoners of war. On that trip Father Berrigan made notes which, on his return, he put in the form which appears here. This is the second of two installments. Father Berrigan's most recent published work is *Love, Love at the End*, a book of "Parables, Prayers and Meditations."

day, toward evening, to new life. Its evidence of genocidal intent and execution was beyond any reasonable doubt. The officer spoke of the killing of fisher folk who came to repair a dike which had already been destroyed; another group of fishermen were attacked at evening on their return and the meeting with their families and wives and children. The aim is evidently the destruction of the industrial and social and religious and educational fabric of a society.)

In the face of all this we thought of the release of the prisoners and could understand it less and less.

Two-and-one-half hours this afternoon rubbing our noses in the fact and meaning of death. The Colonel spoke of the deliberate experimentation with new weapons upon the Vietnamese people. Everything, in the course of three years of air warfare, had been improved — from airplanes to anti-personnel bombs.

(N.B. Department of folkloric intelligence. Our meetings this afternoon are being held in a former home of Madame Nhu.) At one point of our interview we were interrupted by an air warning. . . .

For the rest of the afternoon the Colonel continued to insist on one point which seemed fairly obsessive to us but which might be the strongest legal point available to these people: "The war at present is the only way open to us to implement the Geneva Agreements." A tough, long day. . . .

Monday, February 12th took us to the former French St. Paul's Hospital, a large U-shaped building with a front garden behind a wall and a statue of the saint. We entered, to be greeted by Dr. Tiu, the Vice-Minister of the National Health Service, and Dr. Phan Van, the Director of the Surgical Hospital. The latter proved to be an extraordinarily interesting man whose surgical training had taken place, as he told later, in the jungles under the resistance against the French.

It was in the air that we were evidently going to get it, chaps to navel. I am going to try again to underscore the high points of an extraordinarily difficult three-hour session. What can it mean to ordinary men, endowed with ordinary resources of compassion, to view the overwhelming evidence of the death-dealing power and will of their own government? The question remains. But my diary proceeds.

What followed that morning was in two parts. First, an hour or so report on medical progress since the end

of French occupation. . . . There followed a series of movies in which a succession of horrors committed against medical facilities was repeated, one after another with a kind of enervating sameness. The details are of no great moment, except as they would assure us that the attacks upon medical facilities lie beyond the realm of any rational explanation based upon error and chance. Some 248 attacks have destroyed some 127 major medical installations. This includes 24 major hospitals and 39 district hospitals and 54 other sanitary installations. Every attack seemed to have about it a single-minded plan. The planes always separated over an urban area, one group attacked the city itself and another group concentrated upon a hospital area. The visiting team from the International Crimes Commission declared that they had never seen such destruction as has been wreaked upon the medical facilities of the North.

I am quoting what follows from my notes, scrawled in the changing light of a film in progress, in a hand nonetheless shaking with emotion and shame. As I wrote then, I felt like a Nazi watching films of Dachau. On and on is the record of perfidy and extermination — leprosarium, t.b. hospitals, lying-in hospitals, general hospitals, medical stations. Destroyed, destroyed. A hospital in the vicinity of Hanoi destroyed by cluster bombs, some 300 beds complete ruins. Five provincial hospitals remain untouched. It must be stressed that most of the hospitals are far from any other population centers. The only conceivable purpose is to maim and kill the patients, and to induce terror in the medical workers, in order that the society as such might be intimidated. . . .

There followed a heartbreaking summary of four "classical" cases of the wounding of civilians by CBU bombs. We were allowed to see in some detail, in the medical explanation, the x-rays of four victims of "anti-personnel warfare": a child of ten years, a young woman 23 years old who was a teacher, a girl of twelve, and an older woman of some 55 years. It would be of no profit to give medical details here. These were exemplary cases of those who were in schools or streets or backyards or homes which had been destroyed in the course of massive anti-personnel bombings. The teacher had some 200 pellet wounds upon her body. The boy had suffered the death of his younger brother and his father. The teacher and pupil had been wounded in the course of an ordinary day at school.

We can testify that these exist as described; we went from the x-ray lecture immediately to visit them, where they had been brought to one room in order to be viewed. We returned to the room for another cup of scalding tea; the hospital was murderous cold. . . .

The windows of the hospital, as the windows of every public building from the airport to the factories, are covered with paper designs glued to the windows in order to prevent the fragmentation of the windows in the bombings.

The morning exposure to medical realities closed with the usual ceremonies comprising the usual exchange of emotional response and messages to the American people. To the more cynical-minded West, of course, these greetings have the air of a Stalinist first-generation cynicism. But there was something that came through beyond this and met our hearts in midflight. Ceremony or no, truth or no, it is invigorating and even shocking to hear expressions of great love for one's own government, as we did repeatedly that week. "Our leaders live the life of the people and do not work for their own interests." A working principle of great simplicity and of great value. "Many of our visitors have agreed we of Vietnam are fighting not only for ourselves but for the whole world." This is a sentiment of the greatest value in the midst of those more complicated sentiments of dubious value, heard from the highest powers at home, and largely at the expense of simple communication and simple truth. . . .

Tuesday, February 13th. In a situation like ours, no day can be said to close, no day can be said to end in the way it began. We had been wondering and wondering about the prisoners, when our first meeting with them would occur, where they were, or what they were thinking.

The day dawned dreary and mordantly cold. It was a "good day" by Hanoi standards: When the clouds lowered it was unlikely the bombers would come out. Our first meeting of the day was to be with Mr. Ky, the head of the union of journalists in Hanoi. His duties also included the teaching of philosophy to various groups in the city; as far as we could judge, a kind of wandering scholar. . . .

(I sometimes find it difficult to separate the course of an interview from the course of my own reflections upon it. This difficulty seems to increase in proportion as the speaker himself is seminal and is able to scatter over my face the seeds of some liberation, of some light. So, in what follows, I will try my best to distinguish and to assign responsibility for statements, but I am not at all sure that I can cut the loaf that cleanly.)

He began: You are Americans, and you are here, and that is a very great thing. And in your homeland, the fact that poets appear on stage in readings for peace and the fact that Johnson cannot, in spite of many years of effort, subvert the intellectuals — all of this points to an enormous achievement for your

society. It also points to the pernicious attempts of a war-making machine, the blocking off into an enclave of war of the best powers of civilization.

He quoted: "To me a good friend from afar is like ten thousand books." He said: Life in wartime has become normal life here. It is only by normalizing it that we make it bearable for so long a time.

I speak of the failures of experts to give the world back to the amateurs. And in this regard I quote Muste: "Our need is for a foreign policy for children."

Ky said: If our sense of pride rests upon that which is truest to America, surely you and we can hope that the majority will not support the war. His following thread, centered around what he called the lies — the five lies of Johnson — induced in me certain reflections on the meaning and necessity of the guerilla in our own society.

I thought the following was remarkable. He said: we do not attempt to estimate our situation by the number of planes which have been brought down over our countryside. The decisive factor for us is, rather, the firmness and constancy of our people. Life here continues, our production is good, the agricultural output is steadily advancing, no food need be imported, our national goal of five tons of rice per hectare has largely been reached — more than one-half of the delta is now producing this extraordinary amount. And yet, in 1963, before the bombings, this was not so and was even thought of as a dream.

This rice production is our main lifeline. And the extent of the effort in order to produce according to the needs of the people cannot be underestimated considering the bombings night and day, the fields filled with craters and shrapnel, a constant threat to the lives of the people. For you must understand that we cannot install sirens in the open fields and that therefore a constant watch is required. Mr. Johnson, he said, must answer for this. A grain of rice kills no one. And yet to grow it the peasants' blood must be shed. And so the peasants say, the rice fields are our battlefields.

He went on to speak of what must be called a kind of mystique of the factory — something deeply thought and evidently true to the facts. And I summarize: When the French were here, they made sure that they destroyed all factories before leaving, and even carried off the machinery. Since 1954 we have built some 1,000 factories. Their capital is a special and precious thing to us. It represents the frugality of the people, not their exploitation by foreigners, and therefore it must be said that the destruction of the factories is a great cause of hatred because the factories are linked to our blood and bones.

The life of our people, he explained, remains very

simple. They do not need a great many things. He stressed rice, pigs and poultry, cigarettes, tiles, bricks and cement, gas, vegetables, salt — it seemed to me the sound list of those fundamentals upon which a new people emerges from the caves and assumes the beginning of a new consciousness and a new place in the world. I could understand that a Marxist would dwell on the destruction of a factory in somewhat the same way as an older Christian would speak of the destruction of his place of worship.

He went on to invite us to trace with him the concrete results of one single bomb falling upon a people — the resources which were dissipated, the life and death separation of the worker from his family. So with enormous reason it was said that one bombing brings hundreds of social problems in its descent. How then (he asked) could a pilot push a button, since with one death hundreds of problems were left with the living? One must speak of the disturbance of the ecology of a land which would never be the same. Nevertheless, he said, we turn our suffering into strength; we have our sorrows but we do not weep.

We questioned him on the so-called "third force" of the South Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hahn. His answer seemed to me equivocal. It also seemed frightening, in the sense that Dostoevsky's Inquisitor is always frightening. That is to say, the suppositions of one's life are extended into universal values, and it is simply assumed, with a kind of humorless sternness, that the other will fall in line with one's own version of human life.

I quote as well as I can. "Political power reflects a social basis. In South Vietnam, the main contradiction is between the people who are the victims and the people who are the aggressors. The latter will choose to withdraw or to remain. This question must be solved first. Life simply does not permit a third tendency, that they both withdraw and stay. Thus, those who fear the Front and yet want the Americans out are in a transitional state. That is to say, they do not yet understand the Front. But when the Front comes into their midst and explains the truth of things, they will join. And this will include all sectors of the people."

Zinn questioned: The N.L.F. say that they will be very tolerant after the cessation of hostilities. But we must recall that after 1954 many in the South fought with the French. What happened to them?

Ky: May I answer with a parallel example drawn from the North? After 1954 it was clear that over one-half million of our people, from the villages to the capital, had worked with the puppets. We came in

from the jungle very impoverished. There was nothing in the banks or the treasury, and the lands which had belonged to the French were almost totally uncultivated. The average salary was about six dollars a month. Meantime, just before their withdrawal, the French had trebled the salaries of all those who worked for them. And we allowed those collaborators to stay on and decided that their salaries should remain the same as before.

This continued for as long as four or five years after our revolution. Finally, those who collaborated, gathered together and petitioned the government: Do not continue such discrimination as this, it is a shame! It was the attitude of society itself which had helped them to change. . . .

There was another question here for us, we believe, than the question of literal truth. It seems verifiable that some of the collaborators, at least, were not treated in so benign a way. But, in a sense, the very fact that reconciliation to the new society would be possible by a process of inward change seemed to us remarkable. It remains remarkable even though it remains an idea. And it has, one would think, the widest possible implications in prison and parole work, not to speak of questions of public honesty.

(I am including these little Marxist homilies, such as the one that follows, because they reveal the kind of naive faith in human goodness that is so powerfully operative in the North Vietnamese society. Even apart from performance, I think they raise the profoundest questions about one's belief in the human capacity to undergo change.)

Ky continued: As Marxists-Leninists we believe that you cannot confiscate a man's conscience. He must change gradually. So we have often left intact the material conditions of collaborators, of former collaborators, for a period of ten or twenty years. In the same way, we are not in a hurry in our opposition to the Americans; the end of the war may take ten or twenty years. But what is that in comparison with the thousands of years of foreign aggression which we have endured? Indeed, we have a saying: To one who has traveled 4,000 miles, 10 miles more are nothing. Moreover, such puppet functionaries as we are speaking of have been in their state of mind and their social condition since their birth. It would seem to follow that they cannot be changed in two or three months, so we let life itself, step by step, solve this question.

We inquired as to the meaning which the word "democracy" might have in the Democratic People's Republic. I summarize the enlightening little discourse that followed:

For us, the people are the master and the admini-

strators must in fact serve them. So for us problems of law and the constitution are not primary; the real question is that of the dominance of the people in all fields — economic, cultural and political. So, for example, in the production fields the peasants make the decisions and planning and techniques. So also with the workers; they are masters from production to distribution of the goods. Let me speak of another example of what I mean. A child has the right to ten kilos of rice per month, a miner 24 kilos. This is plenty for the needs of each. But, for example, if I work better than another man, I receive more in salary and may use my salary as I wish. But the least the regime can do for me is to supply my basic needs — which, in fact, amounts to the need of rice. . . .

Even though we had hopes of meeting with the members of the Catholic community, we wished to open the religious question with a Marxist. And so we asked Mr. Ky to comment briefly on religious conditions in the North. He made three points which I summarize.

1) Religion is a question of conscience and is never to be solved or resolved by means of violence.

2) We regard religious people with a "social eye." That is to say, they are workers, peasants or intellectuals, and from a social point of view they are or are not our friends.

3) The religious question is inevitable in the course of history. One simply cannot suppress what is fundamental to man. At the same time, however, we insist that man should be marked by a patriotic conviction; one must participate in the work of building the society. Some may disagree with communism in principle. We ask them only to join us in building the country. Therefore no administrative measures can be used to solve what is essentially a question of conscience. So we respect the creeds.

Churches here were bombed (by the religious Americans) and the government gave aid to reconstruct these buildings. Here we join in to help the Catholics celebrate their Christmas. I myself, he said, go to the cathedral at Christmas to share in their joy. And at the time of Mr. Salisbury's visit to us at Christmastime, I invited him to my home to share in our Christmas banquet. Indeed, a bomb does not distinguish a Communist from a Catholic. And many believers have joined in our revolution from the beginning. The Buddhist monks also helped; they hid many revolutionaries. And so, after the war, we never once entered the pagodas with army units. (This seemed to us a good basis in principle for working out what had been a vexing religious problem, especially since the exodus to the South in 1954. . . .)

Somehow or other, in a way which is inexplicable

ON DIALOGUE

to me now, the following delicious paragraph got included toward the end of Mr. Ky's discourse to us. I find its note of confidentiality and off-the-cuff bonhomie both engaging and terrifying — almost as though an elderly and dotty relative were pushing one to the wall with excessive affection to assure one that there was a body in the potting shed but that of course it was all right because superior powers were in charge whose goodness could not rationally be placed in question. It went somewhat like this:

Confidentially, I will say to you that the Johnson aggression is being defeated. His military skill is really very backward. It cannot understand the meaning and force of the Peoples' Army. The Americans admit to a great surprise in the last weeks, but we are in no sense surprised. But they are incapable of understanding us, so our natural mode of operating becomes a great shock to them. Imagine! over thirty cities attacked simultaneously, thousands of people involved. And where during all this preparation was the C.I.A.? And I must say that there are many unexpected things in preparation for Mr. Johnson. So an early withdrawal would be a very fortunate thing for the American youth. I have met with these young people many times, and I must say that I love them very much. We fight them only because we are forced to do so. In the near future we must win our final victory, and therefore there will be many more casualties. But how can we in all conscience avoid this? We have already undergone many years of suffering, and we cannot lengthen our suffering beyond limit for the sake of your youth. In spite of the love we bear for them, we cannot bear with their aggression. So the real question is how to bring the Administration to an understanding of how to do this. How can we bring them to an understanding of the war which will be to the benefit of their own youth? How can we insure that the resources of the U.S. are not to be squandered uselessly in this war? And how also to solve the terrible burden placed upon our conscience by the temptation to excessive killing?

(I must say, in all honesty, that I find the preceding, as I read it over again in the rather less heated atmosphere of my university, an admirable and balanced examination of conscience. If such statements are to be smeared with the tarbrush of propaganda, then one must admit that this is a totally admirable and new form of propaganda, one based forsooth upon an understanding of the horrendous waste of lives on both sides of the firing line. And if the word "propaganda" expresses and summarizes the sentiments, one can only say from his deepest heart, scored by some four years of Western political expression: *Vive la propagandel!*)

"Dialogue" is a word frequently used in the pages of worldview and other publications engaged in exploring the bonds that unite disparate groups and in exposing the differences that lie at the heart of disagreement. Religious groups speak of dialogue with other communions and sects; at times the waters of verbal acrimony have parted and hawks and doves proposed a "dialogue" with various members of the species about Vietnam policy. A lessening of cold-war tensions has afforded perhaps the newest exemplar of dialogue, that between East and West. Its continuance is attested to by the appearance of the first English-language edition of an "international review" devoted to this exchange and called, appropriately enough, Dialogue. What can be achieved by this approach? What are its signposts and limitations? The editors of Dialogue, published in Vienna, offer their view of this process "In Place of an Introduction" to Vol. I, No. 1. (Members of the review's international committee with whom readers will be familiar include Yves Congar, O.P., Erich Fromm, Josef L. Hromadka, Johannes B. Metz, Paul Oestreicher and Charles West.)

Cold War produced cold philosophies. Both anti-communism and anti-capitalism had that much in common that they took the other fellow at his worst, which was often founded in stark reality. When the Thaw came, somewhat warmer views became feasible and even fashionable. With the Cold War ice melting, some elements of good were laid bare on either side, at least for those who had more use for their heads than to bury them in their hands bemoaning the corruption of the world since Good Old Joe's death.

So far this new situation does not amount to much more than discovering, with increasing speed, that the other system is not altogether bad, and one's own not altogether good. Can we proceed from here to discoveries more thrilling than this truism?

What is this "some good" in each other's system? If communism (capitalism) is not an entirely diabolical system of oppressing good people who would otherwise love to be good capitalists (Communists), what else is there, more precisely, in it?

Could it be that planned (free) economy is not just a flop, proletarian (bourgeois) democracy not just a fake? Could it be that atheism (Christianity)