

[Opinion](#)
[Guest Voices](#)



Members of the Kings Bay Plowshares — from left, Martha Hennessy, Mark Colville, Clare Grady, Carmen Trotta, Patrick O'Neill and Liz McAlister — stand outside the U.S. District Courthouse in Brunswick, Georgia, on Oct. 24, 2019, just after the trial on charges related to their 2018 protest against nuclear weapons. (Wikimedia Commons/Bones Donovan)



by Carole Sargent

[View Author Profile](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

January 12, 2024

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

2023 marked the 100th anniversary of the country's oldest secular pacifist organization, the [War Resisters League](#). Also, a new film opened in November about Bayard Rustin, who organized the 1963 Great March on Washington and the Freedom Rides and once served as War Resisters League co-secretary.

In the film "[Rustin](#)," the head of the NAACP quips that the War Resisters League only took a chance on Rustin so he could be "serving — I mean *saving* white people from the bomb." Though factual errors do the War Resisters League no favors, it does remind us why the organization continues to matter in an increasingly militarized world.

And as the War Resisters League's legendary annual softball game of "anarchists versus socialists" showed, it unites those who are, in activist Matt Daloisio's words, "willing to take risks and chances together, and trust each other."

Catholic sister inspires a look at the league

A study of the late Sacred Heart Sr. [Anne Montgomery](#) led me to this. As the antiwar daughter of a World War II rear admiral and decorated warrior, she famously swam in cold, dark Connecticut waters to a Trident nuclear submarine to hammer on it and be arrested. Again.



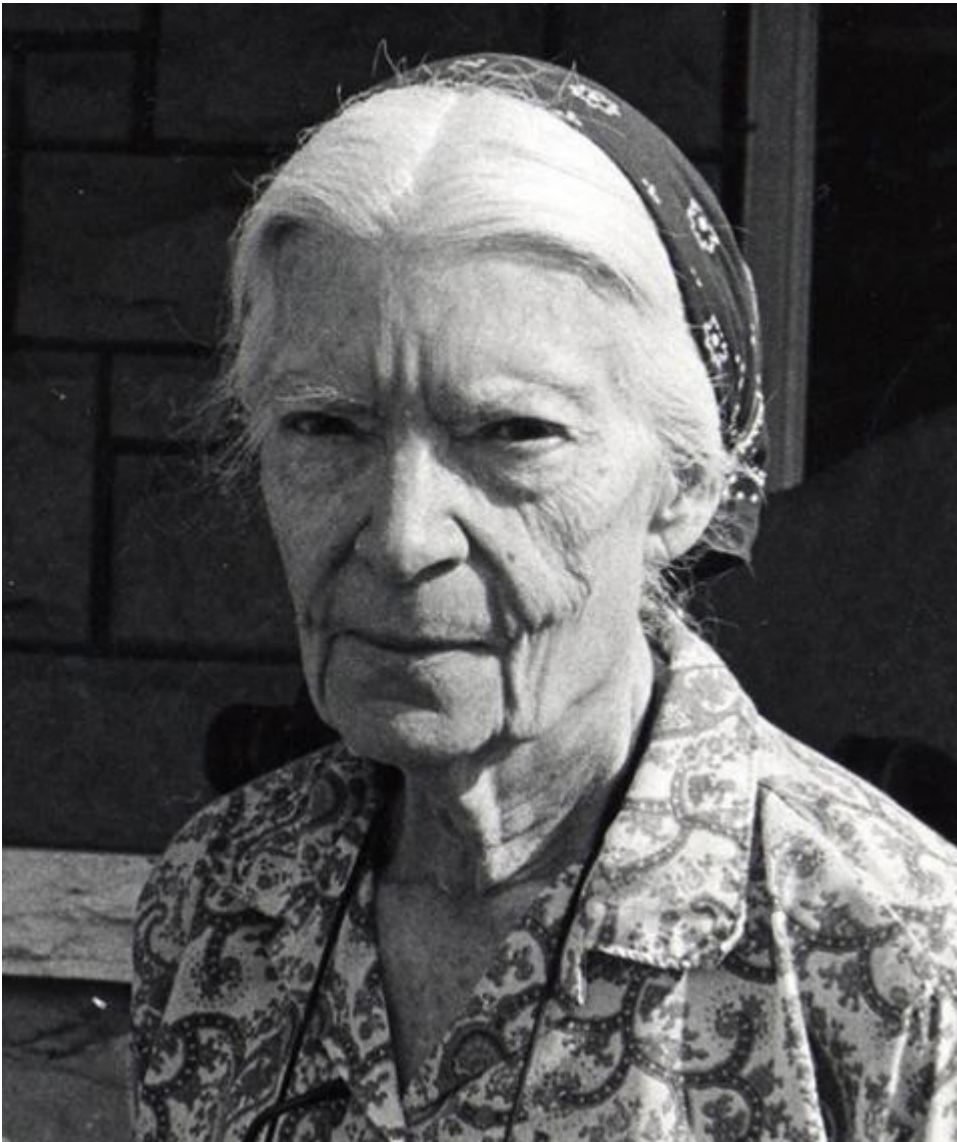
Sacred Heart Sr. Anne Montgomery, a member of the Christian Peacemaker Team, reads outside the "Witness Against Torture" camp at the military zone boundary near the U.S. detention facility in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, Dec. 13, 2005. (CNS/Reuters)

When I learned of Montgomery's participation in two [WRL Peace Awards](#) as part of the Plowshares Disarmament Community (honored in 1986) and Christian Peacemaker Teams (in 2002), I wondered just how many Catholics this nonreligious group had engaged over its century. The award's Catholic honorees include Dorothy Day (1963), co-recipient Diane Nash Bevel (1964), Ammon Hennacy (1969), Daniel Berrigan (1974) and Kathy Kelly (2010).

Montgomery was one of many sisters drawn to the War Resisters League's radical pacifist stance, including Dominican Srs. [Ardeh Platte](#) and [Carol Gilbert](#), and Holy Child Jesus Sr. [Megan Rice](#).

Lay Catholic participation

When Catholic journalist and activist [Eileen Egan](#) wrote about the War Resisters League's 50th anniversary in the September 1973 *Catholic Worker*, she believed its co-editor Hennacy forged the first alliance with the league in 1955 over shared resistance to civil defense drills that remain iconic.



Dorothy Day in 1974 (NCR photo/Albert de Zutter)

However, my research showed that the relationship began a full quarter-century earlier, beginning in the 1930s with *Catholic Worker* co-founder Day, who remained a lifelong supporter.

In the 1950s, the War Resisters League's secular identity puzzled some mainstream faithful, who didn't expect fellow Catholics on its picket lines. In 1956, a Catholic

heckler at a protest demanded that Hennacy recite a Hail Mary to "prove" he was Catholic, not communist. Hennacy instead asked him to drop by the local parish and ask the priests, who could vouch for him.

That street challenger may have thought he was sticking up for a more conservative Catholicism, but in fact some members of the Catholic Worker and other Catholic groups connected to the War Resisters League have also been pro-life activists. This depends on assumptions that all radical peace activists think alike, or that they consistently align with liberal secular positions.

Advertisement

Mary Rider, who is married to [Kings Bay Plowshares](#) activist and former War Resisters League staffer [Patrick O'Neill](#), said fellow league workers and a feature in WIN, the league's quarterly magazine, accepted her pro-life views even when the majority were pro-choice.

As [Robert Ellsberg](#) said, "They could respect conscience."

Ellsberg had been drawn to the league through his interest in the work of draft resister Randy Kehler. At a War Resisters' International meeting in 1969, Kehler had famously inspired Ellsberg's father, [Daniel](#), to leak the Pentagon Papers, and Robert Ellsberg grew up "revering" him.

[Joanne Sheehan](#), O'Neill and [Frida Berrigan](#) all lamented the loss of the "Peace Pentagon" at 339 Lafayette Street in Manhattan, New York. The War Resisters League shared the building, which was sold in 2015, with the Catholic Peace Fellowship and other pacifist groups, some Catholic.



The front door of the building known as the "Peace Pentagon" is seen in 2016. (Wikimedia Commons/Beyond My Ken)

Berrigan noted its geographical position between the Maryhouse Catholic Worker and St. Joseph's House. She said the league "served as a third space ... before technology totally permeated the Catholic Worker. Workers would come to WRL to check their email, to use a computer. It was the stopping-off point on the way home from a demonstration."

Many other lay Catholics have been active over the decades. Everyone interviewed mentioned Kings Bay Plowshares protester [Carmen Trotta](#), who worked for the War

Resisters League in the aftermath of 9/11.

Catholicism was a complex topic for an Italian-American stalwart of the organization, Ralph DiGia, whom War Resisters League leader David McReynolds [eulogized](#) as "a second generation Italian anarchist."

DiGia's atheist-anarchist father forbade his Catholic mother to take the children to church, and DiGia grew up dismissing religion as antithetical to social conscience. But then he met sisters, laity, seminarians and priests whom he respected politically out on the picket lines.

Although DiGia remained secular, while in Danbury prison as a war objector he attended Catholic Mass, as well as Jewish and Protestant services, to understand religious approaches to peace.



Top left: Holy Child Jesus Sr. Megan Rice (CNS/Transform Now Plowshares handout via Reuters)

Top right: Dominican Srs. Carol Gilbert and Ardeth Platte speak on the U.N. Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in Camden, New Jersey, in 2019. (Claire Schaeffer-Duffy)

Bottom left: Arthur Laffin, Frida Berrigan and Matt Daloisio in Lafayette Park in Washington, D.C., Jan. 11, 2023 (Courtesy of Frida Berrigan)

Bottom right: Jesuit Fr. Daniel Berrigan blesses Carmen Trotta during an Ash Wednesday vigil outside the Wackenhut Detention Center in New York in 1999. (CNS/Catholic New York/Stephen Steele)

Priests in the league

Sheehan, the former chair of [War Resisters' International](#), saw more priests in Catholic Peace Fellowship than in the War Resisters League, though they worked closely together. In 1965, the league distributed a declaration that was what [NCR](#) [called](#) "the first complete public disavowal of the [Vietnam] war by a Catholic priest." Daniel and Philip Berrigan, then both in the priesthood, signed the declaration nearly three years before joining the Catonsville Nine.

The War Resisters League entered the mid-20th-century debate over whether Catholics could be conscientious objectors. The military refused to acknowledge atheists and the unchurched as conscientious objectors until 1965, when the Supreme Court ruled for the nonreligious in *United States v. Seeger*.



A religious pacifist, the Rev. Francis Hall, right, sits before a test tribunal for conscientious objectors in New York, Sept. 23, 1940. Also onstage from left are Roger Baldwin, director of the American Civil Liberties Union; Evan Thomas, chairman of the War Resisters League; and Herman Reissig. (AP/Anthony Camerano)

However, many Catholics mistakenly believed the church also disapproved, especially after Pope Pius XII's 1956 criticism of conscientious objectors in light of just war, and notwithstanding the Second Vatican Council's later 1965 approval ([*Gaudium et Spes*](#)). Ellsberg said that Catholic Worker associate editor [Tom Cornell](#) grew up thinking Catholics could not even *apply* for such status.

In November 1965, McReynolds published a [letter to the editor in NCR](#) offering the War Resisters League's help for readers — presumably Catholic — who wanted to apply for conscientious objector status.

In August 1969, some Catholic league members celebrated a Mass for Peace on the Pentagon concourse led by Fr. Harry Bury, director of the University of Minnesota's

Newman Center. Two worshipers marched to the office of Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird to put their draft cards on his desk. After briefly jailing them, the government dropped the case.

In 1971, various religious groups and Detroit Auxiliary Bishop [Thomas Gumbleton](#) teamed with the War Resisters League for the Pax Romana annual convention. From 2003 to 2006, Jesuit Fr. G. Simon Harak served as the league's national anti-militarism coordinator while living with other Jesuit activists, including Daniel Berrigan.



From left: Detroit Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Gumbleton in 1979 (NCR photo/Roger Catlin); Jesuit Fr. G. Simon Harak (Wikimedia Commons); Fr. Harry Bury in 2021 (CNS/Courtesy of Association of U.S. Catholic Priests)

Engagement on nuclear weapons

In 1979, Pax Christi teamed with the War Resisters League, Catholic Workers, Sojourners and the Fellowship of Reconciliation to oppose the second Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT II). Ellsberg argued in the Catholic Worker that the first "limitation" treaty doubled the nation's armaments. The second was little improvement if they would increase by another 30%.

In June 1982, Cardinal Agostino Casaroli, then papal secretary of state, gave a message to the U.N. General Assembly's Special Session on Disarmament. To commemorate this session, the War Resisters League unveiled a temporary sculpture by William King in Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza saying, "STOP WWIIII."

It remained for six months before going to a college campus. Observers hoped Pope John Paul II would go beyond deterrence and speak wholly against nuclear weapons, but that was not yet forthcoming.



Catholic activists place large sticker posters on the walls of the United States Mission to the United Nations in New York City in 2023. The posters read, "U.S. sign the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons." (Felton Davis)

In 2010, the league initiated a protest and die-in at rush hour inside New York's Grand Central Station lobby during the U.N. Special Session on Disarmament. They were joined by Frida Berrigan, [Art Laffin](#) of D.C.'s Dorothy Day Catholic Worker, Platte and Gilbert, St. Joseph Sr. Liz Profreidt, the Catholic Peace Fellowship, former seminarian and league activist Bill Ofenloch, [Brian Terrell](#), [Martha Hennessy](#) (one of

Dorothy Day's granddaughters), Veterans for Peace and Think Outside the Bomb.

In November 2023, the War Resisters League joined Catholic Workers, the Atlantic Life Community and Nukewatch at the U.S. Mission to the United Nations, demanding the U.S. sign the U.N. Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

At the Peace History Society conference in October, Sheehan and others from the War Resisters League brought a stunning [eight-panel exhibit](#) featuring its history in photographs and a timeline. It travels, so you may be able to arrange for the display to come to your university or library by writing to wrl100history@warresisters.org.

A version of this story appeared in the **Feb 2-15, 2024** print issue under the headline: War Resisters League marks 100 years with Catholic ties.