

Catholic Guerrillas

Larry Dunn

1968

“When we first began speaking to the guerrilla forces, we were afraid of being used. We re-examined our reasoning and said to ourselves: ‘Wouldn’t it be nice if for once we were used by the people at the bottom instead of being used by the people at the top.’”

Marge and Tom Melville, former Catholic missionaries in Guatemala, spoke these words during their recent visit to Detroit (July 31-August 1). They made three speaking engagements, sponsored by Youth for Peace Freedom and Justice, in Ann Arbor, Southfield, and Detroit.

Because they are Catholics and Americans, the first programs they initiated in Guatemala were liberal, non-violent, and altruistic. Of course these failed. Marge explained it this way: “While I was working with the liberal Catholic students at the university, I came in contact with the guerrillas. I was impressed by their sincerity, and surprised to find that they thought of themselves as primarily teachers. They were armed out of the necessity to protect themselves from the army and from the Mano Blanca (a right wing terrorist organization). When I spoke to my superiors about the ineffectiveness of my activities, I told them that I was thinking of joining the guerrillas. They only laughed at me.”

Tom encountered failure in a different way. He was working on co-operatives and labor organization in the peasant villages. He said that “every time a peasant got involved in any significant community organization, it was only a matter of weeks before he turned up dead, assassinated by the Mano Blanca. 4,000 peasants have been lost this way in the past two years. I finally decided that the peasants were morally justified in arming themselves, and that this was the only way to accomplish the revolution.” When it was discovered by the government that the Melvilles were seriously considering aiding the guerrillas, they were expelled from the country.

The Melvilles feel that the prime reason for the failure of the revolution is that the right wing government is backed up by the United States. This aid takes the form of guns, planes, helicopters, and training by the green beret anti-insurgency teams. When they returned to the U.S. they began looking for ways to prevent the tragedy of American boys supporting 2% of the people in Guatemala against 85% of the people.

They took the first step in preventing this on May 17. Together with the Berrigans and five others, Marge and Tom entered the Cantonville, Md. draft board, seized 600 1-A files, and burned them in the parking lot with home-made Napalm.

As Marge stated: “The purpose of this was to show people in the peace movement that there are “other Vietnams” to be concerned about. Too many people think that when the Vietnam conflict is resolved, everything in the world will be fine.”

Tom and Marge Melville and the rest of the “Cantonville Nine” are now awaiting trial and facing a possible 54 years in jail. Frank Joyce, National Director of People Against Racism and a member of the national steering committee of RESIST stated that “This may very well be the most important political trial of this century; more important than the Debs or Spock trials.” YPFJ agrees with this and is going to bring the Melvilles back to Detroit shortly before the trial in October. If you missed them the first time, be sure to keep your eyes and ears open for the exact date of their return.

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