

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2012/01/23/83-year-old-activist-priest-held-in-solitary-confinement-in-federal-prison/>

Campaign and Advocacy

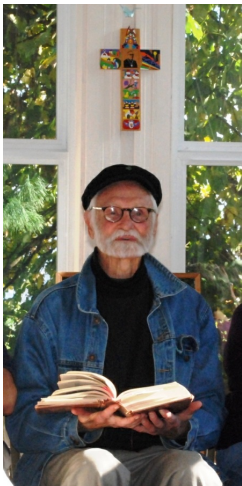
close

Search

close

close

by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | January 23, 2012



Jesuit priest and peace activist Father Bill Bichsel is reportedly being held in solitary confinement at SeaTac Federal Detention Center south of Seattle. According to friends, Bichsel has not eaten solid food since January 10 in protest of his treatment.

Fr. Bichsel, known to friends and colleagues as Bix, is a member of the Disarm Now Plowshares group. He has been arrested several times in connection with nonviolent civil disobedience at military bases, nuclear weapons manufacturers, and the School of the Americas. Most recently, he served a three-month sentence at SeaTac for a July 2010 action at the Y-12 National Security Complex in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, future site of a new nuclear weapons plant.

On January 10, Bichsel was moved to a halfway house in Tacoma. According to the [Disarm Now Plowshares blog](#), he was told that the facility had a rule prohibiting visitors for the first 72 hours of residency. But on the evening of his arrival, a pair of Buddhist monks and a small group of students, on their way to a local protest, made a small detour and stopped by the house Bix was in, to drum and pray for him outside the building for a few minutes. The blog continues:

Bix was very happy to see and hear all who came to visit and wanted either to invite everyone in or go out and be with them. He had a strong sense they were angels, which gave him intense joy. He went on to comment that it was so right they should be there.

His captors on the other hand had a slightly different experience. First reprimanding him for being out of compliance (whatever that meant), he was told he was going to be written up and what happened was to be reported. The rest is history in early morning he was suddenly awakened, grabbed out of bed, shackled, and returned to SeaTac by the marshals.

Their actions and manner of treatment made it known to him how he would proceed. Upon his arrival at SeaTac he made it clear he intended to be in complete non-compliance with their demands; their recourse, which was to be expected, would be to place him in protective custody or the special housing unit (SHU) the hole!

Bichsel, who suffers from circulation problems as well as a heart condition, reported to friends that it was very cold for him all of the time in his SHU cell at SeaTac, and that he was going 24 hours a day without sleep, fighting off the chill. I have asked for a jacket or a pillow or a mattress; they do not comply. After supporters held a candlelight vigil outside of the prison last week, he was provided with additional blankets.

According to an article in the [National Catholic Reporter](#), a spokesman for the Federal Bureau of Prisons said that while he couldn't comment on the case of a specific inmate, he did say that the typical issue for all inmates in the federal system is a blanket and sheet, and that there is a full health services staff on duty at all of our facilities. A public information officer for the BOP told the paper: If we

receive information either from the inmate or the inmates doctor on the street that there was some sort of pre-existing condition that was being treated, obviously we would pick up the ball from there.

Several other religious peace activists have been held in solitary confinement at the SeaTac SHU in recent years. They include members of a group of others (all of them over 60 years old) who in 2009 broke into the Kitsap-Bangor Naval Base outside Seattle, where nuclear submarines are kept. At their trial for trespassing and conspiracy, [the judge criticized](#) the defendants lack of remorse and called their protest a form of anarchy that could lead to a breakdown in the social order.

According to [fellow activist Blake Kermer](#), who visited Bichsel on Saturday, Bix wants everyone to know that as he continues on his fast yesterday was his eleventh day that he feels stronger and more confirmed in his resolution. Bix says that Christians can unite in conscience where God speaks to all of us, to abolish nuclear weapons and to oppose those policies of the US that are without conscience. This was a point that Bix was reminded of when he was taken back to the BOP and told by his jailer that his re-arrest was a matter of policy, not of conscience. Bix talked about how policy without conscience reminded him of the White Rose and their courage in protesting Nazi policies without conscience, even though they were beheaded for their resolve.

Disarm Now Plowshares has provided [addresses for public officials](#) to whom supporters can write, as well as the [prison address of Fr. Bichsel](#).

Update, January 28: Disarm Now Plowshares and the [Seattle Times](#) have reported that Fr. Bichsel has broken his fast after two weeks of subsisting on two pints of milk a day:

A Tacoma priest and peace activist best known for breaking into a nuclear submarine base in Kitsap County has ended a two-week fast that drew sharp concern from some in the local faith and peace communities.

Father William Bix Bichsel, a Jesuit priest based at St. Leos Parish, had been fasting to protest nuclear weapons, inhumane treatment at prisons and the separation of policy from conscience, according to his attorney Blake Kremer.

The ailing 83-year-old broke his fast Wednesday, according to portions of a letter from him published in the Disarmnowplowshares Blog, because he felt himself weakening

Bichsel began his partial fast, taking only 2 pints of milk each day, to protest what he saw as the arbitrarily inhumane and harsh treatment of his fellow prisoners as well as to draw attention to his opposition to nuclear weapons and the existence of policies divorced from conscience, Kremer said.

News of Bichsels sanction, and subsequent fast, sparked outrage and a flurry of letters and phone calls to the prison and the media from members of the faith and peace communities. A vigil was held for him outside the detention center last Sunday

In his letter last Tuesday, Bichsel said he has now received additional clothing and blankets. In addition, he has been so encouraged by the support from well-wishers and by a real sense of Gods presence that he no longer seeks release from the Special Housing Unit.

Update, February 9: [Disarm Now Plowshares](#) reports that Fr. Bichsel was released from SeaTac prison today after four weeks in solitary confinement.

While he was in prison, local Tacoma cartoonist R.R. Anderson designed a Bix [nonviolent action figure](#).



James Ridgeway (1936-2021) was the founder and co-director of Solitary Watch. An investigative journalist for over 60 years, he served as Washington Correspondent for the Village Voice and Mother Jones, reporting domestically on subjects ranging from electoral politics to corporate malfeasance to the rise of the racist far-right, and abroad from Central America, Northern Ireland, Eastern Europe, Haiti, and the former Yugoslavia. Earlier, he wrote for The New Republic and Ramparts, and his work appeared in dozens of other publications. He was the co-director of two films and author of 20 books, including a forthcoming posthumous edition of his groundbreaking 1991 work on the far right, *Blood in the Face*. Jean Casella is the director of Solitary Watch. She has also published work in The Guardian, The Nation, and Mother Jones, and is co-editor of the book *Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement*. She has received a Soros Justice Media Fellowship and an Alicia Patterson Fellowship. She tweets @solitarywatch.

Accurate information and authentic storytelling can serve as powerful antidotes to ignorance and injustice. We have helped generate public awareness, mainstream media attention, and informed policymaking on what was once an invisible domestic human rights crisis.

Only with your support can we continue this groundbreaking work, shining light into the darkest corners of the U.S. criminal punishment system.

by [Juan Moreno Haines](#)

October 25, 2022

by [Solitary Watch Guest Author](#)

October 13, 2022

by [Vaidya Gullapalli](#)

September 29, 2022

Solitary Watch encourages comments and welcomes a range of ideas, opinions, debates, and respectful disagreement. We do not allow name-calling, bullying, cursing, or personal attacks of any kind. Any embedded links should be to information relevant to the conversation. Comments that violate these guidelines will be removed, and repeat offenders will be blocked. Thank you for your cooperation.

I hope they keep him locked up. If anything, we need MORE nukes.

Frequently, in order to get things changed, you do have to break some laws. To call attention. He accepts that, but the way hes being treated is NOT acceptable. When did this turn into a communist country? Disgusting that those who speak out in the United States, where we allegedly have freedom of speech, freedom to protest, etc. are now imprisoned without any idea when their incarceration may end. This country IS going to fall, and it is the politicians, with their greed, their corruption, their evil, their lies, that is doing it.

I dont share his political beliefs but I cant imagine why a peaceful protester would be locked up in solitary. That is not how a free or just

society deals with dissent. It is tantamount to torture for most people.

Star Spangled Banner lyrics excerpt:
And the star-spangled banner in triumph shall wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave

except for the elderly

@John: BOP = The Bureau of Prisons.

@ John McDevitt BOP=Bureau of Prisons. Federal prison system.

Tell the truth with out the sensational bs and you will be heard.

It is a shame that when the word Catholic comes up most people think of a pedophile when within the confines of a corrupt church organization there are so many brave Catholics who actually walk the walk of peace and love that Jesus taught. Bix is right.

The judge is the danger to society: what insanity. Murders, rapists, armed robbers get small sentences and parole/probation. Drug users overflow the prison after 40 years of war. This is permitted because the money flows into bureaucratic hands and coffers. But non-violent protesters attempting to form a better world are treated quite harshly, both here and abroad. All those power people seen at the State of the Union Address the other day are complicit, even R. Ginsburg as she slept, even President Obama as he promised, lied and painted a glowing picture which was so alluring, and so impossible.

We have enslaved blacks, exterminated the Native Americans, imprisoned the Japanese Americans, persecuted the Irish, the unionists, the fellow travelers and now the Muslims, the Jews, the atheists. Land of the Free? America the Beautiful? Get real. The whiter and richer you are, the better you are. Latinos get out.

Damnyanqui so not only do you hate the central tenets of the actual teachings of the LORD Jesus Christ, you hate the elderly as well, and think they should just stay silent, stay out of sight, and die? You are a despicable human being. I bet the only priests you respect were the ones who helped ferry Nazis out of Europe so that they could continue to spread your own vile personal ideology.

The right wing government only believes in Christianity when its used to fuel their for-profit war machine. They have no respect for the love or pacifism or justice of Jesus Christ. In fact, it is their greatest threat.

What does BOP stand for?

A single man of peace in a world of HATE and GREED Whats WRONG with this picture?

Kevin Gent hopefully one day you will find yourself in a position that you can no longer go along with a rule you find abhorrent and unconscionable. and discover the injustice of a system that protects the profiteering, war-mongering, soulless cowards that run it.

Kevin Gent, Seriously? It sounds like he did accept the consequences of his actions, as he was in jail. But putting an 80+ year old in solitary is not what I want my country to do.

who cares?

Is damnyanqui for real? dy sounds like Madeleine Albright: We think the price was worth it. The context? 1/2 million dead babies.

Send prayers for peace for body and mind to Father Bichsel and the others. Salaam!

Its telling that this criminal is in his 80s. Obviously a leftover from the days of anti-American radical priests of yore. Of course, for decades, the Jesuits have been in tight competition with the Maryknoll communists to be the worst of the worst. It will take a generation for the Church to expunge these vermin from its midst. Some of them reach all the way up to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, which periodically goes so far awry as to throw the word Catholic into doubt.

Lets hope Father Bichsel uses his time in solitary for some serious prayer and reflection on his work against both God and his country, then avails himself of the sacrament of penance upon his release.

@Carl watch this interesting interview on this mornings Morning Joe on MSNBC about a new book which warns of the possible misuse of surveillance, censorship which could form the necessary elements of a modern-day Inquisition.

<http://video.msnbc.msn.com/morning-joe/46162232#null>

God bless and keep you, Bix, and all others who are willing to go to these lengths to call attention to these issues on our behalf. That is, all of the worlds people whose lives and indeed, our fragile planet, would never be the same, if these weapons are ever used. We owe a great debt to your courage.

I very support Bix and wish that I could do to help. But I did posted this information to the contact to the White House so people will be aware.

@joyjoy69: Im not sure what your experience is mentioned in your first line.

My experience tells me that there is significantly more to this story than we read here.

But if you had clicked on the red highlighted (the judge criticized) you would have read the following.

The pattern of the national media is to ignore courtroom trials also, regardless of their drama, leaving them to local news reports or

websites.

One example: In a Tacoma, Washington federal courtroom in March, an 84-year-old Society of the Sacred Heart nun, Anne Montgomery, 82-year-old Jesuit priest Bill Bichsel, and three other activists over the age of 60 another Jesuit priest and two women were sentenced to jail terms. Montgomery, it should be noted, was one of the Plowshares Eight some 30 years earlier. Their sentences ranged from six to fifteen months, plus one-year supervised release. Their crime: attempting to symbolically disarm the Trident II missiles stored in the Strategic Weapons Facility-Pacific (SWFPAC) at the U.S. Naval Base Kitsap-Bangor, 20 miles from Seattle.

According to their own account, the five defendants, all affiliated with Disarm Now Plowshares, at 2 A.M. on All-Souls Day in November 2009 used bolt cutters to break through a [perimeter] chain-link fence in an area where Trident submarine nuclear warheads are stored. They then walked almost four miles into the base and cut through one double-layered chain link fence and then another barbed wire fence and alarm wires, ignoring a sign warning that deadly force was authorized against intruders. They had entered a bunker area that protesters said housed the largest nuclear weapon stockpile in the United States reportedly more than 2,300 warheads, or almost one-fourth of the entire U.S. arsenal. They said their action was designed to call attention to the illegality and immorality of the existence of the first-strike Trident weapons system. After putting up banners and scattering blood and sunflower seeds, and hammering symbolically on a road and fences, they prayed until they were arrested, thrown to the ground, handcuffed and hooded. They said they were then questioned by base security, the FBI and the NCIS (Naval Criminal Investigative Service).

In a joint statement after their arrests, they further explained their motivation: As U.S. citizens we are responsible under the Nuremberg Principles for this threat of first-strike terrorism hanging over the community of nations, rich and poor. Before their sentencing on trespassing and property destruction charges, each of the defendants spoke and focused on the personal responsibility they feel to disarm nuclear weapons, and their desire to prevent pain, suffering, and death for those deprived by our wars and military budget of a human way of life. The judge, noting the defendants lack of remorse, called their protest a form of anarchy that could lead to a breakdown in the social order. Some 250 supporters of the group had turned out for a pre-sentencing rally featuring song and prayer.

You would think this story with its angle of a nun, priests and lay people of an advanced age penetrating a high-security nuclear weapons installation, is what we used to call news. It is at least as newsworthy for the national media as, say, a congressman texting sexually suggestive pictures of himself to women, Sarah Palins latest gaffe, or the Canadian and U.S. travels of the newly-married duke and duchess of Cambridge. But while there were articles about the arrests in the Bremerton and Longview, Washington, newspapers, we have found no national news media coverage of this and similar significant incidents of civil disobedience or of the subsequent trial.

How much more do you need?

CMON POEPLER!!!!!! He knew the rules. He flagrantly broke the rules. Now he wants to whine, and has you whining for him for the consequences of those actions. Wake up you sheep!!! We as humans are an amalgam of the choices we make. Make your choices. Break the rules if you feel you must, ethically. But accept the responsibility of those choices.

God bless you Bix; I am so very proud of you and consider it an honor to know you. You walk the walk, civil disobedience is the name of the game. Stay well we need you.

I believe it takes crazy old coots, like Bix, to bring enough attention to this issue that there may be a possibility for change. When I grow up I hope I have as much courage, heart and craziness! Love you Bix!

My experience tells me that there is significantly more to this story than we read here. Im not saying that what happened was right. Im just saying that an ethical journalist would have sought to find the explanation a little more aggressively and would have either provided it to us, or explained why they were unable to provide the rest of the story. I know this much: the majority of Americans either support intentionally or else implicitly the existence of a nuclear arsenal, and this mans actions jeopardize the security of that arsenal. If he has a legitimate point, he can tell us all and convince us to disarm. Instead, he seeks to impose his beliefs on a majority who disagree and act in a way that clearly displays how easy it would be for al-Qaida to compromise nuclear material and use it against us. Again, not saying this treatment is rational or justified, just saying there is a whole side to this story not presented by the journalist. I happen to agree with Bix, but Im not certain his behavior or attitude were wise or even just. How much damage does a guy like this do to the movement when he makes it so easy for those not already convinced to label his entire message as that of a crazy old coot!

We love this courageous man. And all the others who have been willing to go to prison to bring light to our governments wrongs, including Steve (who has apparently been in solitary since last May), Lynne, Ann, and Susan.

North Korea? Iran? China?
The U.S.?

Oh my.

Bix is in my prayers. Stay strong my friend.

Another fine example of the willing use of solitary confinement as a punishment tool by our gorilla justice system. This practice of putting people in darkness will eventually result in their own burning by the light. change will come and justice will prevail.. what were they thinking when they came to lock him up??? oh likely they werent

I found the following excerpt from your post has confirmed the thesis of a Harvard professor in a recent article in the New Yorker. Our justice system emphasizes process and procedure rather than principles.

..reprimanding him for being out of compliance in early morning he was suddenly awakened, grabbed out of bed, shackled, and returned to SeaTac by the marshals.

This was a point that Bix was reminded of when he was taken back to the BOP and told by his jailer that his re-arrest was a matter of

policy, not of conscience. Bix talked about how policy without conscience reminded him of the White Rose and their courage in protesting Nazi policies without conscience, even though they were beheaded for their resolve.

Now the excerpt from the New Yorker article:

William J. Stuntz, a professor at Harvard Law School, is the most forceful advocate for the view that the scandal of our prisons derives from the Enlightenment-era, procedural nature of American justice.

his search leads to the Bill of Rights. Stuntz suggests that the Bill of Rights is much inferior to the French Declaration of the Rights of Man.

The trouble with the Bill of Rights, he argues, is that it emphasizes process and procedure rather than principles.

The Declaration of the Rights of Man says, Be just! The Bill of Rights says, Be fair!

Instead of announcing general principles no one should be accused of something that wasn't a crime when he did it; cruel punishments are always wrong; the goal of justice is, above all, that justice be done it talks procedurally.

You can't search someone without a reason; you can't accuse him without allowing him to see the evidence; and so on..

The obsession with due process and the cult of brutal prisons, the argument goes, share an essential impersonality.

The more professionalized and procedural a system is, the more insulated we become from its real effects on real people. That's why America is famous both for its process-driven judicial system and for the harshness and inhumanity of its prisons.

Once the procedure ends, the penalty begins, and, as long as the cruelty is routine, our civil responsibility toward the punished is over. We lock men up and forget about their existence.

Stuntz argues for the saving grace of humane discretion. Basically, he thinks, we should go into court with an understanding of what a crime is and what justice is like, and then let common sense and compassion and specific circumstance take over

For Stuntz, justice ought not be one procedural error caught or one fact worked around. The criminal law should once again be more like the common law, with judges and juries not merely finding fact but making law on the basis of universal principles of fairness, circumstance, and seriousness, and crafting penalties to the exigencies of the crime.

Read more http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2012/01/30/120130crat_atlarge_gopnik#ixzz1kOk0IROi

Really? A peaceful demonstrator treated like this?

:Several other religious peace activists have been held in solitary confinement at the SeaTac SHU in recent years. They include members of a group of others (all of them over 60 years old)

Wow~! they must be afraid of us!

P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

Solitary Watch

Copyright 2022, Solitary Watch

Read about [rights and permissions](#).



Solitary Watch News