

Nun worried about mission, not about prison sentence

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BOONEVILLE, Ky. (AP) — Sister Marge Eilerman will be going to prison. Sister Karen Lindenberger will be left to run an Appalachian mission all alone.

Both figure it is worth it.

Sister Eilerman was sentenced last week to six months in a federal prison for trespassing at the School of the Americas at Fort Benning, Ga. She expects an even stiffer sentence March 2, when she faces additional charges of destruction of government property for digging a mock grave at the Pentagon.

“I will spend six months in prison and probably more than that after my second offense, and those who have committed the crimes ... none of them have seen day one behind bars,” Sister Eilerman said Monday. “That is not justice.”

Sister Lindenberger, who has served with Sister Eilerman in Owsley County for a year, said she has purposely avoided that level of civil disobedience because it would not be good for the community.

“Since there are only two of us here at this mission parish, we decided that it wouldn’t be good to have two of us in jail,” she said.

Sister Eilerman was among 22 protesters convicted and sentenced Wednesday in U.S. District Court at Columbus, Ga. They were among 601 people arrested at a November demonstration at the school, which they claim teaches assassination and subversion techniques to Latin American soldiers.

The military contends the institution, which moved to Fort Benning from Panama in 1984, is largely responsible for the growth of democracy in Latin America and teaches its students about human rights.

Sister Eilerman, 60 an Ohio native who has been in Booneville since 1984, said that one human rights course on the school’s curriculum is self-graded.

“We all know that anything that is self-graded is not a primary concern,” she said.

The school’s students have included Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega and reputed

Salvadoran death squad organizer Roberto D’Aubuisson. She blames its graduates for a massacre last year in Chiapas, Mexico, where she and Sister Lindenberger have done mission work.

“The hope that they seem to have is that by putting all of us behind bars for six months, is that this will extinguish the flame of our desire to close that (school),” she said.

Rather than condemn her actions, the church has been supportive of Sisters Eilerman and Lindenberger.

“On the contrary. We see it more as a prophetic act on her part that she is speaking for those who have no voice to speak for themselves — and that she’s speaking the truth,” said Sister Jacquelyn Doepker, community minister for the Sisters of St. Francis of Tiffin, Ohio.

“We are upset because we feel it’s a travesty of justice that she has been sentenced to prison for such a small act of civil disobedience.”

Sister Eilerman and the others were sentenced to prison because they had been warned not to protest at the school again. Sister Lindenberger said she was ordered to stay away for a year, a ban that expires on Nov. 16 — the ninth anniversary of the slaying of six Jesuit priests in El Salvador.

“I also spent time in Chiapas on mission and, so, have very much feeling for the people there and how they’re suffering,” she said. “But not the same amount of passion that Marge has to actually go to prison.”

Sister Doepker, who worked with Sister Eilerman in Booneville to help found the Holy Family Catholic Church there, said a letter-writing campaign has started on behalf of the 22 sentenced last week. But Sister Eilerman said she and the others will likely have served their sentences before any appeals are completed.

“Our major concern is not the prison time,” she said. “The punishment is not going to be going to prison. It’s leaving Booneville.”