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Franciscan Louis Vitale facing prison for peace again

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

Editor's Note: Frs. Vitale and Kelly appeared in court Oct. 17, changed their plea to no contest and were immediately taken into custody. For details see: [Priests imprisoned for five months in torture protest.](#)

This week in Tucson, Ariz., Franciscan Fr. Louis Vitale, along with my Jesuit brother Fr. Steve Kelly, will stand trial. They're being tried on thin and haughty charges -- trespass and failure to obey an officer's orders.

November 2006, the two approached Fort Huachuca, the notorious base where instruction goes on in the practice of torture. In their hands was a letter addressed to Maj. Gen. Barbara Fast, base commander. She was the top U.S. intelligence officer in Iraq as torture went on at Abu Ghraib. In the letter they wrote: "We condemn torture as a dehumanization of both prisoners and interrogators?. We are here today?to say that the training of torturers must immediately stop. Nothing justifies the inhumane treatment of our fellow brothers and sisters."

Guards at the gate forbade their entry, and the two took to their knees and prayed. Now they face a caricature of court, having lost the means to mount a proper defense. The judge has ruled as inadmissible subjects such as torture, Abu Ghraib, international law and the Military Commissions Act. Likely he'll show himself more lavish come sentencing time. Louis and Steve are looking at the prospects of many months in jail. It comes with the territory when one is incorrigible and notorious. Louis, 75, has been at the task of peacemaking a good long time -- this despite his early years following a conventional path and

doing the expected things.

He grew up in California and attended L.A.'s Jesuit Loyola University. There he studied and drilled with the ROTC and then entered the Air Force as a navigator and intercept officer. In 1959, he entered the Franciscans, received ordination in 1963, and then taught in a small Franciscan college while pursuing his doctorate.

Then began the social revolution of the 1960's -- everything under question, the old edifices under scrutiny, and injustices thrown off like an old garment. Most priests were of the old guard and few jumped in. Louis by contrast took the leap and landed on his feet. He joined every social movement around and took on the big issues -- civil rights, draft resistance, the rights of farm workers. Cesar Chavez was his mentor, with whom he fasted and studied nonviolence. And he moved in circles where he met Dorothy Day, Philip Berrigan, Mother Theresa, Dr. King, Thomas Merton, and later Archbishop Romero.

In the early 1970s, he moved to Las Vegas and there started the Franciscan Center for Social Justice. And with the war in Vietnam ending, he turned his gaze toward the growing anti-nuclear movement. His first order of business was to learn of the dark purposes of the infamous Nevada Test Site, a vast desolate stretch, the most bombed place on the planet.

He became a provincial in 1979, and one of his earliest official acts was civil disobedience with Fr. Daniel Berrigan against nuclear weapons development at U.C- Berkeley. (Few male provincials, before or since, have dared such an act. I think it should be a requirement of all church leadership in today's times.) And while most equate the will of God with institutional prosperity, Louis took a refreshing, one would say scriptural stand. He famously renounced development funds and endowments. Surpluses he disdained. He earmarked them for the needs of the poor -- a policy that grew with his many solidarity delegations to Central America. That's where I met him some 20 years ago.

For the 800th birthday of St. Francis of Assisi in 1982, Louis and friends launched in Francis's name the Nevada Desert Experience. Here was a Lenten campaign of civil disobedience to demand an end to nuclear weapons tests. The thing was conceived as a one-time occasion. But it goes on to this day -- probably winning the honor of being the longest sustained nonviolent civil disobedience campaign in U.S. history. (See: www.nevadadesertexperience.org). Tens of thousands since have come and crossed over the line, and the steady pressure has had an enormous impact. The government has halted over-ground testing. And thousands of Christians have learned a thing or two about civil disobedience and the diabolical nature of the bomb.

Then from 1992 until 2003, a long stint as pastor of San Francisco's St. Boniface church, in the Tenderloin district, the city's poorest neighborhood. There Louis hung out his pastoral shingle, priest to the homeless. He opened shelters and drop-in centers and served those in need. But to the surprise of the media, and the discomfiture of Christendom, he welcomed vagabonds and the rootless to sleep in the church. News outlets across the country converged on the scene to see. The pews teemed every day with the exhausted and the ill, dry and warm at last. And parishioners rose to the occasion and helped with job training and recovery programs. To this day the homeless look to St. Boniface as a welcoming place.

Meanwhile, Louis helped get Pace e Bene off the ground -- a program to teach the techniques of active

nonviolence (See Paceebene.org), a topic for which Louis is eminently qualified. He's been arrested for peace and justice countless times. One Nevada police officer told the local paper with obvious pride that he has personally arrested Fr. Vitale a hundred times. At Fort Benning, Ga., home of the School of Americas, soldiers have arrested him twice. The first time earned him three months in jail. The second time, a harsher six months in jail.

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He came to Albuquerque, N.M., last month as my friends and I were tried for our attempt to gain the attention of our senator's Santa Fe office. My friends and I will be sentenced Nov. 5. Louis came to support us, and he and I got to talking.

"There was nothing in my background that taught me about peace," he said. "I was in the military. I was told we needed nuclear weapons. But during the Vietnam War, the movement began to teach nonviolence. Hearing Dr. King, watching the Berrigans, and being around Cesar Chavez changed my life. I became convinced that nonviolence was the way of God, not killing people. Besides, I've never met anyone I've wanted to see dead.

Of his action at Fort Huachuca, he said, "Our message is that torture has come home to us. We learned from Fort Benning that the U.S. manuals on torture come from Fort Huachuca. The Nazis tortured, Latin American death squads tortured, now we know that we torture people, too. But where does it come from? It comes from Fort Huachuca. That's the headquarters. It's one of the most sinister places on the planet.

"We can make a difference. It can be done. We awakened people to the Nevada Test site. We helped stop nuclear testing. If we all realize [that] we have only this one world created by God, we can work together and help create a new world where we all live as one.

"St. Francis got caught up in a bloody war, and realized that war is not what God created us for. So he came out of it committed to a new world without war. We have to learn from him. We need to address the world's needs with love and compassion, not with war and destruction.

"And we need to have hope. Hope is justified. Half of the human race has been involved in nonviolent movements during the last few decades. These are the hopeful signs. I've seen people come together, and work together for the betterment of others. I've witnessed many nonviolent movements, the miracles of political transformation. I've seen the Berlin Wall fall. I've seen wars end. In nonviolent movements I see unmistakable signs of God.

"My conviction is that we can work together. We can transform our world, culture by culture, drawing on the way of the Gospel, drawing on the example of Francis, Clare and other witnesses to nonviolence. All human beings have the heartbeat of compassion and love. But we have to help them," Louis said. "We have to help them locate the desire for peace that beats already in their hearts."

John Dear's new book, *Transfiguration* (Doubleday) is available from www.amazon.com and the new

DVD about him (with music by Joan Baez and Jackson Browne) is available from www.sandamianofoundation.org. For information on Fr. Louis' trial, see: tortureontrial.org. Pax Christi has just published an Advent booklet by John, "The Advent of the God of Peace," (from www.paxchristiusa.org). Next week, John will attend the beatification of Franz Jagerstatter in Linz, Austria. For his speaking schedule, see: www.johndear.org.

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