

U.S. Franciscan detained on Cairo street

Sharon Abercrombie Catholic News Service | Jan. 11, 2010



Fr. Louis Vitale

OAKLAND, Calif. -- Franciscan Fr. Louis Vitale's recent travel to the West Bank and Cairo was not a journey for the fainthearted.

He was tear gassed outside a Palestinian olive grove and detained on the streets of Cairo, Egypt, by a large police force. He went without food for a few days in solidarity with residents of the Gaza Strip who do not have enough to eat because of Israel's ongoing blockade, and he offered energy bars and water to weary Egyptian cops who surrounded him and some of the 1,362 people from 42 nations who were in the Egyptian capital for a Gaza freedom march Dec. 31.

NCR columnist Jesuit Fr. John Dear was also in Cairo. Read his accounts here: [Christmas in Gaza](#) [1] and [Hunger strike for Gaza](#) [2].

For Vitale, the adventures were normal parts of his life. A long-time pacifist, he co-founded the Nevada Desert Experience, a movement to end nuclear testing, and Pace e Bene, an Oakland-based organization that sponsors peace trainings. He has spent time in federal prison for participating in civil disobedience at the former School of the Americas in Fort Benning, Ga., and for nonviolently protesting torture training at Fort Huachuca, Ariz.

In December, the 78-year-old priest, who lives at St. Elizabeth Parish in Oakland, joined Dear, a fellow pacifist, on the trip to Cairo, the first leg of a journey through the Sinai Peninsula into Gaza to commemorate the first anniversary of an Israeli attack on the area that left 5,000 men, women and children wounded.

He spoke to *The Catholic Voice*, Oakland diocesan newspaper, Jan. 5 after returning.

Vitale said he decided to join the march "because our world is a community and when we see people unjustly suffering, we have to support them."

The two priests left 10 days before the scheduled march so they could visit the West Bank to see for themselves what daily life is like for Palestinians. They met farmers who cannot get into their own fields to care of their

crops because of the Israeli security wall and other government efforts to limit Palestinian movement, he said.

The priests joined a group of farmers who gather each Friday in front of their fenced-off farms to peacefully protest the Israeli actions. The group was bombarded with tear gas.

"It really hurts," Vitale said.

But the visitors witnessed some positive developments as well. They met Palestinians who are reaching out in peace to their Israeli neighbors. One group began when an Israeli man whose daughter had been killed in a disco bombing met a Palestinian whose brother also had been killed by a terrorist.

"The two realized they had their pain and hurt in common," Vitale said. "So they determined to get other people like themselves talking to one another. They started a hot line where Palestinians and Israelis who had lost loved ones could talk with each other."

Vitale concelebrated midnight Mass with Latin Patriarch Fouad Twal of Jerusalem and 200 other priests at St. Catherine's Church in Bethlehem, West Bank. Patriarch Twal told the churchgoers that the plight of today's Palestinians is similar to the oppressive situation that Jesus, Mary and Joseph suffered under the Roman occupation 2,000 years ago.

And like the Holy Family's exodus to Egypt, the next part of Vitale's journey was to Cairo for the solidarity march.

The march did not happen, however, because the Egyptian government banned the group from making the trek. It also banned them from all public gatherings and meetings in Cairo. Even groups as small as five were considered public gatherings, Vitale said.

As a peaceful protest, the two priests decided to join 22 individuals in a fast that included Hedy Epstein, an 85-year-old Holocaust survivor.

When a large group of the protesters gathered in front of a museum, vowing to walk to Gaza, they were immediately surrounded and detained by the police. Vitale said he felt some empathy for the lawmen because they are very poorly paid and were on duty for 24 hours straight.

While sitting on the curbs, the protesters began singing and offering the police energy bars and water. Said the priest: When it comes right down to it, in state-sponsored oppressive situations, "we are not the only prisoners in the prison."

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