

Excerpts from:

Love is What Matters:

The Essential Writings of Louie Vitale

Edited, with Introduction, by Ken Butigan

Introduction

In 2012 Friar Louie Vitale received an honorary doctorate from the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. The building was packed with joyous students and their families who were celebrating at this august graduation festival. The highlight of the event was the conferring of three honorary doctorates. Two scholarly gentlemen collected their award and delivered magisterial exhortations brimming with scholarly exegesis.

Then it was Louie's turn. His presentation was short and to the point. "I've discovered in my life," he said, "that love is what matters in the end. And all I can say is: I love you! I love you! I love you! I love you!"

And then, with a final, rousing "I love you!" as he was waving his arms in an exuberant gesture of blessing, he sat down.

The crowd was amazed and delighted.

For the three decades that I've known Louie, I have seen the amazement and delight in countless situations. Louie is down-to-earth, earnest, passionate and deeply, deeply loving. He is at home in the streets and in jail – where he has spent years serving time for nonviolent resistance to war and injustice – but also in the classroom, in nature, in his tiny hermitage, and at the dinner table with friends just hanging out.

It is clear that he has taken seriously the example of Saint Francis and the way of Jesus.

Louie is a Franciscan priest who has sought to put the vision of peacemaking articulated and practiced by Francis and Clare of Assisi into practice. A former provincial of the St. Barbara Province in the western United States, Vitale was a co-founder of the Nevada Desert Experience – a spiritually-based

movement that sought to end nuclear weapons testing at the Nevada Test Site – and Peace e Bene Nonviolence Service.

He has long been actively involved in a series of peace movements challenging his government's wars in Vietnam, Central America, Iraq, Afghanistan and many other parts of the world. He has spent long stints in prison for nonviolent resistance to torture and war-making. For thirteen years beginning in the early 1990s, Louie was the pastor of St. Boniface Catholic Church in a low-income neighborhood in San Francisco, California, where he was actively involved with Religious Witness with Homeless People, an interfaith campaign challenging poverty and government policies of harassment against poor and homeless people.

Louie grew up in Pasadena, California. After attending military school he joined the United States Air Force in 1958, where, as a captain, he became a pilot and navigator on nuclear-capable jets. His father, Louis Vitale, Sr., had long expected his only son to follow him into the management of a highly successful seafood company that he had started in Los Angeles after arriving as an immigrant from Sicily as a young man. He was stunned and perplexed when his son announced, after finishing his tour of duty with the military, that he had decided to become a Franciscan.

Louie Vitale was enthralled with the life and work of Francis of Assisi (c.1182-1226). The son of a wealthy merchant, Francis grew up steeped in the vision of chivalric honor and romantic love. He went off to combat in a war between Assisi and a neighboring city-state. During one of the battles he was captured and spent a year as a prisoner of war.

After being ransomed by his father, he underwent a profound conversion experience. In 1208 Francis took radically to heart the thoroughgoing demand of Matthew 19:21—Jesus' call to the rich young man to give everything away and follow him. Francis, burning with the desire to imitate the poor and crucified Jesus, renounced his claims to his family's wealth and espoused "Lady Poverty" or "Holy Poverty" as his lifelong companion. Francis' vow of voluntary poverty was an intuitive critique of the growing economic and social disparities in 13th century Europe as it witnessed the shift from rural to

urban life, the rise of the merchant class, the coming end to feudalism and the emergent monarchies and nation-states.

Francis was convinced that God was the Most High who was Transcendent Goodness, a Goodness that was lavished especially on the poor. To become voluntarily poor is to share the plight of the poor but also to share in the life of the God who gives everything. This God was, for Francis, worthy of praise and endless gratitude. It was with these convictions that Francis finally became a self-described “troubadour” -- not a singer of earthly honor and romantic love, but a singer of the God who loves us with infinite mercy and tenderness. Gradually, others were attracted by this vision. Originally contemplating becoming a monk, Francis set off in a new direction: an itinerant, mendicant, apostolic life of preaching and witnessing to the life of God in Christ while remaining at the margins of society.

St. Francis vigorously counseled peace between warring city-states and between Christians and Muslims. His devotion to embodied peacemaking and nonviolent intervention is captured paradigmatically in the story of the Wolf of Gubbio where Francis brokered a resolution between an Italian village and a wolf by meeting the needs of both sides. This is even more compellingly demonstrated in his sojourn to visit with Malik-al-Kamil, the sultan of Egypt, during the fifth crusade in 1219 when he “in the midst of wartime, went to the enemy *unarmed* and *loved the enemy as a brother*.” (From: Marie Dennis, et al., *St. Francis and the Foolishness of God*, Orbis Books, 1999, 86.) Francis attempted to embody Jesus’ words to “love the enemy” and facing the enemy within.

Like Francis centuries before, Vitale had observed the implements and dynamics of war at close range. Vitale did not serve in a hot war – his stint in the air force took place between the Korean and Vietnam conflicts – but he was actively enlisted in the Cold War struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union. Although he felt the allure of Air Force fighter jets – “Those things still excite me, even after all these years in the peace movement,” he has said since then – Vitale nevertheless began to question the projection of U.S. power they represented. He also worried about the threat they posed. Once as he and his crew were flying a routine mission along the U.S.-Canadian border, they received orders to shoot down an approaching aircraft determined by headquarters to be a Russian military jet

crossing into U.S. airspace. Vitale radioed his base three times for confirmation, and each time the order was reiterated. Finally, the crew decided to make a visual inspection. When they did, they saw an elderly, smiling woman waving to them. At the last moment they averted shooting down a commercial airliner. This incident contributed to growing qualms about remaining in the military. In contrast to the life of a jet pilot, he felt increasingly drawn to religious life.

The roiling social conflict of the 1960s – and the nonviolent social movements that were active then – became a kind of formation process for Vitale. In the 1960s and 1970s, he had worked actively on a number of social justice and peace fronts in addition to his anti-war and farm worker ministries, including solidarity work with welfare recipients and helping to found the U.S. Catholic Conference's Campaign for Human Development.

Vitale founded and served on the staff of the Las Vegas Franciscan Center in 1970 after completing a doctorate in sociology at the University of California at Los Angeles. He became the pastor of St. James Catholic Church, a parish in a low-income neighborhood on the west side of Las Vegas.

Vitale had been elected vice-provincial at the end of the 1970s by members of his province – a jurisdiction that embraces much of the western United States -- and was abruptly elevated to superior of the province when Provincial Minister Fr. John Vaughn, OFM was called without warning to Rome to lead the worldwide community of Franciscan men as the Minister-General of the Friars Minor of St. Francis of Assisi.

Through his active participation in the United Farm Workers' struggle for the rights of the migrant poor and his visible opposition to the Vietnam War, Vitale was regarded as an emphatic advocate for justice and peace. In the wake of the heady days of the Second Vatican Council, Vitale was seized by the conviction that the work for peace and justice was central to the identity of Christians. This in itself was not unique. In the wake of Vatican II a growing number of Catholic clergy, women religious, and laity drew a similar conclusion and began to transform an insular church that had often supported social structures that reinforced injustice and war into a community prophetically seeking change.

What set Vitale and a relative handful of others apart was not their theological conversion but how they put it into practice. In his case, he marched and fasted with Cesar Chavez, vocally and dramatically decried the U.S. war in Vietnam, and publicly counseled and stood with young men who burned their draft cards and defied conscription into the U.S. armed forces. He supported the nonviolent civil disobedience of Daniel and Phillip Berrigan and lent his support to a wide variety of other nonviolent social struggles. Fr. Vitale's years in Las Vegas motivated him to work with others to launch the Nevada Desert Experience, a faith-based organization whose goal was to end nuclear testing at the nearby Nevada Test Site. In 1989 he co-founded Pace e Bene Nonviolence Service.

This book offers a glimpse into the journey of this pilgrim for peace and justice through a series of writings penned largely on the way, on the road, on the edges, on the pilgrimage to a world that works for everyone. It comprises reflections on the meaning of Saint Francis's life and work for today, reflections on both the violence and nonviolent potential of our times, and, finally, reflections on his own experience of prison undertaken for a wounded and sacred world.

PART ONE

THE WAY OF SAINT FRANCIS

Our Christian Calling: Care for Creation

Born and raised in Southern California, I can remember what that land of sunshine and crystal air was like before smog. As a child I ran on clean beaches and dove into the waves. The pounding surf gave me a sense of God. And in the nearby mountains I would look up at the tall fir trees and could not see their tops. This natural cathedral also made me think of God. To me there was no grander place in the world than beautiful California.

As the years passed, I experienced a genuine sense of loss as the natural beauty slowly disappeared. I now recall the scenes of my childhood as one might remember a friend who died. Oil spills suffocate marine life and shroud the beaches with tar. Raw sewage contaminates the surviving fish and infects bathers with skin and eye irritations. On land, industrial chemicals and human and animal wastes reduce the already dwindling ground supply of drinking water. In the air, ozone pollution has exceeded the government standard for air quality control on almost one out of every two days for the last decade. Wildlife disappears as wetlands dry up and forests turn a somber brown. The cathedrals of nature have been desecrated and the signs of God's presence disfigured with pollution's graffiti.

"It Was Good!"

"In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth... God saw that it was good" (Genesis 1:1,10). Creation's Creator set all things in plentiful balance: night and day, winter and summer, dry land and oceans: "Let the earth bring forth vegetation... Let the water teem with an abundance of living creatures" (Genesis 1:11, 20). And it was all very good, self-replenishing, sufficient and beautiful. Then God created humanity to "fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish...the birds...and all living things." When speaking of "dominion," the author of Genesis had in mind some of the good kings of Israel who shepherded God's people, imaging God's own loving concern for all creation. But in

general, we humans increasingly misinterpreted the meaning of "dominion" - as domination and exploitation instead of stewardship.

As humanity emptied the earth of its resources, God admonished them again: "Do not damage the land or the sea or the trees..." (Rev 7:3). "Was it not enough for you to graze on the best pasture, that you had to trample the rest of your pastures with your feet? Was it not enough for you to drink the clearest water, that you had to foul the remainder with your feet?" (Ezekiel 34:18).

Like Adam and Eve we have misused the fruits of creation, turning God's garden into a wasteland. Like Cain we have killed our brother, Abel (which means "transitory breath"), a thousand times over as we decimate irreplaceable species after species, forest alter forest and bury the debris under plastic litter. Any one of the species might hold a vital cure for modern diseases or become a new food resource.

Saint Francis

Saint Francis of Assisi, in his time, heard the message of God's goodness, of creation's interdependence and of humanity's responsibility toward it, and he serves as a patron of ecology for our time. Hindus who may ignore even Jesus, have great admiration for Francis. Professor Lynn White, a non-Catholic, called St. Francis the greatest spiritual revolutionary in Western history. In 1969 he proposed Francis as the patron of ecology. Ten years later Pope John Paul II made that official. In his first letter on the environment, in 1990, the Pope presented Francis as our model: "Francis...offers Christians an example of genuine and deep respect for the integrity of creation."

Why, in the midst of modern industrial pollution, holes in the ozone layer, global warming and nuclear radiation, do we look to a man of the thirteenth century to give us guidance?

Francis loved nature. He was one with the world around him. He found such joy in nature that he would burst out in song. He saw God radiating in all of creation. Francis pointed out how useful nature is – pure water to drink, air to breathe, fire to light the night, and Mother earth to arrange the seasons, to sustain us and govern us. Centuries before the environment became a concern, Francis saw human beings abusing

nature. In what might be the first ecological statement outside of the Bible, Francis admonished the people around him: "These creatures minister to our needs every day; without them we could not live; and through them the human race greatly offends the Creator every day we fail to appreciate so great a blessing."

Toward the end of his life, Francis wanted to send a message to the world about creation. Although almost blind, he composed the famous "Canticle of Creatures." In the Canticle Francis called all living beings, even the elements of the universe, "brother" or "sister":

The Canticle Of Brother Sun

Most high, all powerful, all good. Lord!

All praise is yours, all glory, all honor

And all blessing.

To you, alone, Most High, do they belong.

No mortal Ups are worthy

To pronounce your name.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through all that you have made,

And first my lord Brother Sun,

Who brings the day; and light you give to us through him.

How beautiful is he, how radiant in all his splendor!

Of you. Most High, he bears the likeness.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Moon and Stars:

In the heavens you have made them. bright

And precious and fair.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air,
And fair and stormy, all the weather's moods,
By which you cherish all that you have made.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Water,
So useful, lowly, precious and pure.
All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Water,
So useful, lowly, precious and pure.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Brother Fire,
Through whom you brighten up the night.
How beautiful is he! Full of power and strength.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Earth, our mother,
Who feeds us in her sovereignty and produces
Various fruits with colored flowers and herbs.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through those who grant pardon
For love of you; through those who endure sickness and trial.

Happy those who endure in peace,
By you, Most High, they will be crowned.
All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Death,
From whose embrace no mortal can escape.

Woe to those who die in mortal sin!

Happy those She finds doing your will!

The second death can do no harm to them.

Praise and bless my Lord, and give him thanks,

And serve him with great humility.

In the Canticum Francis expressed what today we call "deep ecology." Nature and created beings exist in their own right and not just because they are useful to us. All beings have the right to reach their fullness and to be guaranteed their natural habitat. Created by God, they are of great worth and give glory to God, even if we humans did not exist.

The Poor Man of Assisi composed his Canticum in the popular Italian of the day rather than in the more formal Latin. He wanted ordinary people to hear his message. He sent friars as troubadours to spread its message throughout the world. Franciscans continue to fulfill this mandate. They bring the message of peace and concern to people in churches, schools, councils and congresses, and at nuclear weapons facilities.

Peoples of all faiths look to Francis in their concern for the present environmental crisis. Many are learning with Francis from God's Word that all are called to be stewards. At the root of it all is the question of faith: Whose world is this? How do we humans relate, not only to God and to each other, but to the natural world as well?

The Myth Of Progress

What happened between the time and spirit of Saint Francis and today? Our alienation from nature, from fraternal solidarity and from God has persisted like a disease, as described in the opening stories about Creation. Francis saw our alienation from nature as a sign of sin. He strove to restore the harmony of the

Garden of Eden - where the needs of all are met. Many since his time have pursued that same goal, but the means we have chosen to bring about progress have often brought havoc on both nature and humanity. Twenty years ago I moved from Los Angeles to Las Vegas, then a rather small city. The surrounding desert and mountains still recalled "God's creation." But not for long. I remember hearing the first radio report about smog in the city. Today Las Vegas is a boom town, the fastest growing city in the fastest growing state in the nation. A weekend escape - fast, big, fascinating, the epitome of "progress!" But the city's commercial success feeds on an extravagant waste of water and energy. The trade off for the 24-hour glitter includes pollution and the faults attributed to Adam, Cain and Esau: misused resources, greed, unbridled consumption and the craving for instantaneous pleasure. Like Sodom and Gomorra, we wonder how long "sin cities" like Las Vegas can remain livable. Perhaps Las Vegas serves as a warning, a microcosm of the world. But there is more.

Sixty miles north of Las Vegas is the Nevada Test Site. There all U.S. nuclear weapons are tested underground. True, they warn us on the radio about large megaton explosions so that workers can come down from high-rise buildings and up from the mines. "Today there will be a nuclear blast with a range of 20 to 150 kilotons." This is a destructive force several times worse than the atomic bombs that reduced the entire cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to ashes. The tremors are monitored like earthquakes hundreds of miles away where they register 5 and 6 on the Richter scale. Locally, sensitive instruments measure how much radiation leaks into the atmosphere. And what about the earth below us and our water system? No one knows just how contaminated they have become.

Recently, our "Nevada Desert Experience" peace group united with others around the world in fasting to bring an end to nuclear testing. We camped in the scrub covered desert just outside the Nevada Test Site. One morning during the fast an underground test was conducted. We stood with our signs held high and our heads bowed in prayer. A wave of shame overwhelmed me as I thought of what violence we were doing to Mother Earth beneath our feet and to the air around us.

The government later admitted that radioactive gasses had leaked into the atmosphere. How many test site employees were affected? How many workers' wives would eventually be added to the number of test site

widows? Personally, I must admit some panic at the thought of my own body being contaminated with radiation.

Shouldn't this test site be evacuated the way Chernobyl in Russia was to protect workers and residents? Many ecologists feel that the nuclear issue is the test of our human concern today. Are we ready to deal with the specter of extinction through nuclear radiation? Are we willing to risk the consequences of a nuclear confrontation - a nuclear winter brought on by dust and debris so enshrouding the globe that it cuts off the sun's warmth - till only microscopic forms of life survive? Since Francis' time modern technology has "progressed" beyond imagination, but not without costs. Until recently, factories symbolized growth and development. We wanted goods - bigger, faster, in all sizes and colors, with all the gadgets, prepackaged and microwave ready. We exploited natural resources without limit anywhere in the world. We drilled oil until it glutted the market and covered our shores like a pall. Still we drill and waste!

But nobody was keeping score. No one looked to see if we would ever run out of resources. No one asked the consequences on our water supply of building toxic dumps or of spraying tons of pesticides on our farmlands. No one questioned whether or not the thousands of metal drums disposed of at sea would ever rust. A time bomb has been set.

It never crossed our minds that there could be too much progress. We wanted big cities, big engines, the fastest and highest flying planes. Who imagined then that we would be stalled bumper to bumper in gridlock for hours each day as our cars destroy the ozone layer and we inhale the polluting exhaust?

In the United Nations' report on global warming, experts show that the gasses trapped in our atmosphere are actually heating our planet by several degrees. That is global warming. Among the many disastrous consequences, we are already experiencing drought and skin cancer. And more is coming. This is the myth of progress! Our children have become the heirs of our errors. In the 1970's the number of children 6 to 11 with asthma surged by 58%. In the 1980's asthma-related deaths increased 23%. Lung-searing, eye-tearing smog destroys lung tissue almost as effectively as chemical weapons.

We are at war with ourselves! We stand on trial for having put our faith in the mythical god of progress. Elsewhere in the world, technically "less developed" nations try to catch up with us. In their desperation they are often even more reckless and destructive. And their people flee their native lands, too depleted and polluted to offer them a livelihood. Ten million ecological refugees wander the earth, seeking an environment capable of sustaining their lives.

We must ask, when God promised a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21), did God have this kind of "progress" in mind?

The Poor Are Hit The Hardest

Those with the least, suffer the most. People without alternatives are the first victims. While in Appalachia I saw the devastation of that area - the cruel lie of progress' promises. Factories and mines create new jobs and more income. But the strip mining destroyed the land. The factories dumped dye into the streams. And when the land had been raped, the factories moved on and the mines shut down. The people were left with the debris - no jobs and useless land.

When visiting the City of McFarland in the lush grape growing valley of Central California, I met children with cancer. They had played near the fields as low flying airplanes sprayed pesticides. A mother showed me her child - without arms or legs. No one had warned her of the hazard of working in the fields while pregnant. And beyond McFarland's city limits? Those same lethal pesticides are transported to dinner tables everywhere. You can't wash the chemicals off the grapes!

And who lives closest to *our* city dumps and toxic waste areas? Usually low income communities and communities of color. They have no alternative. And where do we ship our toxic wastes? poor countries desperate to pay off their national debt. We also send them our labor-intensive industries, because their poor will work at next to a survival wage.

God gifted humanity with creation for the common good of all, but some of us consume too much. In the United States we use fifty times more energy than people in poor areas of the world. We

waste water and destroy topsoil. And where does that leave people without resources and alternatives? Twenty-five thousand people die daily for lack of clean water. Forty thousand children die each day of malnutrition diseases.

Pope John Paul II tells us that we must have a new sense of solidarity with all peoples. He insists that the industrialized nations cannot deplete the resources of the poorer nations leaving them only waste. We must share all creation if we wish to have God's blessings and live in peace. In January 1990 he reminded us: 'Today the ecological crisis has assumed such proportions as to be the responsibility of everyone' (from "Peace with God the Creator and Peace, Peace with all Creation"),

A New Global Spirituality

Many of us are alarmed, fearful, desperate, even angry. We honestly try to do our bit, but we know that it is not enough. As long as we believe the earth is waiting for us to use it up, we will. We feel powerless and frustrated. We worry for our children. But the time bomb ticks faster. We sense that our spirituality is inadequate. We need a new vision, or is it an old one? It helps when we read the stories from Genesis about stewardship and dominion in a way that reflects God's caring.

"In the beginning," the Genesis stories tell us, God made all creation good, and made us partners, caretakers, stewards. "See, I am now establishing my covenant with you and your descendants... and also with every living creature" (Genesis 9:8-10). An agreement with all of us, together; we share a common destiny, all of us creatures large and small, mighty or humble. Somehow we are all related by God's choice and promise.

Francis understood. Like Adam who was commissioned to name all creatures, Francis renamed them: "brothers and sisters." Paul, too, caught the vision. He saw the new creation beginning with us: "All creation awaits with eager expectation the revelation of the children of God... in the hope that creation

itself would be set free from slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God” (Romans 8:19,21).

The Bible has given us some understanding of God’s created world, but nature itself can be a book of revelation for us. As we look in a microscope we see the incredible complexity and intricacy of all created matter. As we look at the universe we are awestruck at the magnificence of the world. Today we know much more of the interconnectedness of all of life. To destroy one species is to threaten others. To burn rain forests on one continent can imperil us all. Entering into nature gives us a new awareness. That’s it! We care for creation, and it cares for us. We respect its beauty, even unseen in an isolated wilderness, and we glorify God who cares for us all.

On a recent hike in the Rockies I encountered a couple with two babies on their backs. I wondered why they would haul babies out into the wilderness. They explained that they felt it urgent to give them a sense and appreciation of nature very quickly in life. This early learning will enable them to live in community with all of creation.

The Greening Of Religion

Francis longed for the harmony revealed in the story of Eden, a parable revered not only by Jews and Christians, but also by Hindus, Taoists, Buddhists and Native Americans. It is no coincidence then, but a common vision, a mutual sense of reverence, a shared trust, that draws believers of many religions to the recycling centers. They celebrate Earth Day together. They pressure for water conservation and form political coalitions to make offenders clean up toxic wastes. Though they come from many traditions, today’s believers recognize their bonding in sacredness.

I have seen bishops, ministers, activists and concerned parents all bow their heads in silent prayer in unison with the spiritual leader of the Shoshone Tribe at the Nevada Test Site. He prayed for the well-being of all the creatures being desecrated on that part of his tribal land. He was stunned as the bomb

exploded beneath us, groaning for the destiny of all who share life with us. Even the agony of the earth was the pain of her whom we called “Mother.” Not only the crisis of survival, but also the awareness of Sacredness is greening the religions of America. They share a common vocabulary: ecology and creation, responsibility and stewardship, environmental balance and relational interdependence, human rights and nature’s rights, a sacred and common trust. We are experiencing a process of conversion that enables us not only to see the invisible Giver in creation, but to see it as God sees it and loves it. Faith means caring for all of one’s “sisters and brothers.”

"Now We See As In A Mirror"

We call this special way of presenting God “sacramental” theology. Basically, sacraments are manifestations of God’s presence, goodness and power in our midst. God’s loving activity on our behalf. God’s self-gift. Grace. All Sacraments peak in Jesus Christ, the high point of creation. Jesus is its unifying center. He reconciles all as “sisters and brothers.” Jesus’ compassion and self-giving reveal or sacramentalize God’s own loving providence and mercy. And the Holy Spirit calls us to become the New Creation announced by Jesus. Therefore, we can unite with all and speak for all in praising God: “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork” (Psalm 19:2).

Traditionally, the Church used natural elements as sacramental symbols: water, fire, oil, wax, bread and wine. Now we appreciate even more the multiple 13 dimensions of those symbols - leading us to the Creator as well as to the sacredness and integrity of all creation. Sacraments such as Matrimony and Reconciliation remind us of the harmony that should exist in all of creation. A major challenge to the Church today, especially in its Liturgy and Sacraments, is to create this awareness of the integrity of all creation and, therefore, of the sinfulness associated with the present ecological crisis. As we pour water, we are called to remember those who die each day for lack of clean water. As we eat the Eucharist, we are reminded of the millions dying for lack of food.

In the creation story, God rested on the seventh day, the Sabbath. A pattern was set - to step back and enjoy what has been created. Similarly, ecologists see a resting time as critical for the replenishment of the earth and the re-creation of human beings. "Remember to keep holy the Sabbath day. No work may be done then either by you, or your son or daughter, or your male or female slave, or your beast, or by the alien who lives with you" (Exodus 20:8-10).

To Walk Nonviolently On The Earth

We need not only a new spirituality for a global awareness, we need a new way of acting in this world. We say no to violence, to destruction, to revenge, to isolation and waste. We say no to bombs, manipulation, exploitation and domination. We say yes to love, life, solidarity, conservation, dialogue and self-determination. This is called a nonviolent way of life. It means living like Francis by treating all creation with respect, even with love, as our "sisters and brothers."

Waste Not, Want Not

We all have needs. We need food, shelter, clothing, medical aid and education. These needs are critical for the six billion people on this earth. But we have many more wants. We want material possessions and pleasures in abundance. Some define our modern existence this way: "Shop until you drop. The one who dies with the most toys wins." These wants can become insatiable. There is an ancient saying: 'To believe you can cure a person's desire for wealth by giving them more money is like thinking you can put out a fire by pouring butterfat on it.'

It is this craving for more and more and more possessions that seems to be destroying our world. If we continue we will not survive ourselves. Further we will destroy God's created beauty, and we have no right to do this. An antidote is to live as a lover of life. Growing food puts us in touch with God's creative power and also offsets the food shortage. Saving and recycling our used articles shows our appreciation for the goods of life, and also enables us to replenish them. Walking or hiking helps us

appreciate nature, and saves us from the worst forms of pollution. Planting a tree makes us co-creators with God and also helps absorb the carbon dioxide that is destroying life. These are both human and religious acts. They register our respect for life. At the same time, this being in tune with nature is a direct source of happiness. We will discover the joy of Francis as he celebrated life with his brothers and sisters in all the created world.

There is no longer any doubt that we are in a struggle for survival. We are at a moment in history when we must choose. If we continue to exploit our planet, it will be destroyed! This means the end of human life, but also of the magnificent creation that has reflected God's presence for billions of years. That is a great tragedy and sin. But it is not too late. If we can really come to love creation, to cherish and care for it, we can find solutions. We will cut our use of dwindling supplies. We will avoid practices that abuse the earth's abundance so that perhaps no one has an excess, but no one is in need. God has given us an abundant world, what is our response?

I Promise

At this point it would be nice to leave you thinking that you are the shameful one. It is tempting to let you think that I do all these things, that I am like St. Francis. But that surely is not true. One statistic that struck me is that the average American uses 1092 times the petroleum of a farmer in Nepal. But that farmer desperately needs that petroleum to survive. In some ways as a Franciscan I might consume less goods, but I know that I drive more than the average American, probably a lot more. So I use the gas needed by more than 1000 farmers in Nepal. I object to nuclear reactors, but I also overuse electric energy. I must confess my weakness for hot showers, especially long hot showers. I will not choose to use a styrofoam cup, unless there is nothing else to put my coffee in. And why do I need to drink coffee? My list goes on, but I will spare myself the shame.

Conversion begins with little steps. Now I walk some. Soon I will take up hiking. And sometime this year I want to plant a tree. I hope to become involved in efforts to develop solar and wind energy. The same office of the Department of Energy here in Las Vegas that tests nuclear weapons is responsible for developing these alternative sources of energy. Very little of their budget goes for that. But perhaps we can use people energy to help them re-order their priorities. The test site would make a wonderful solar farm! This year we trust God and our leaders will hear our prayers to stop nuclear testing and even get rid of all nuclear bombs.

Oh yes, and let us make a promise to our future children that we shall so live that they will see a monarch butterfly.

PART TWO:

THROUGH THE JAIL DOOR

Although Fr. Louie had a long history of nonviolent action, beginning with his work with the United Farmworkers and draft resisters in the 1960s, one of his earliest act of nonviolent civil disobedience took place in 1980 when he joined a group protesting the University of California's management of the national nuclear weapons laboratories at Los Alamos and Livermore. Later, he shared "how profoundly religious an experience" this overnight sit-in was. From then on, he participated in spiritually-grounded civil disobedience, including repeatedly at the Nevada Test Site north of Las Vegas, where he and others had founded the Nevada Desert Experience, which sought to end the nuclear testing that had been occurring there since 1951.

This form of witness has a deeply religious significance for Fr. Louie. "Stepping across the line," he says, "I let go and let God take over." He reports an elation that accompanies this experience and a "sense of being embraced by God." For him, his time in jail echoes the traditional Catholic spiritual retreat, with space and time for prayer and meditation; mindful attentiveness to the rhythm of the day when it is not filled to the brim with the countless demands of one's everyday life; even the opportunity to experience the desolation and listlessness of boredom.

Jail, for Louie, not only is a kind of religious retreat, it is a very small reminder of the roots of Christian spirituality: Jesus' incarceration and execution, the jailing and martyrdom of Christians during the first three centuries of the Christian era, and the periodic detention and "disappearance" of Christians and other people of faith and conscience down to the present day. Like Jesus, if one deliberately challenges injustice, one will likely face jail or even death.

Louie has even seen the jail experience as a way of reframing the three vows of Christian religious life: poverty, chastity and obedience. Voluntarily-chosen imprisonment can become spiritual space, and spirituality can bring one face to face with the mechanisms of domination.

As his 13 years as a pastor at the inner-city parish of St. Boniface in San Francisco came to an end (after opening the doors of the church every night to those without homes, so they would have a place to sleep), Fr. Louie began to consider taking part in nonviolent witness that might mean more jail time than a day or two, as was often the case previously. He was especially drawn to joining the growing movement to close the School of the Americas at Ft. Benning, Georgia. Those crossing the line were facing significant sentences of three-six months.

This chapter is comprised of a series of reports from three significant jail experiences in 2001, 2005, and 2007 for actions at Ft. Benning and also Fort Huachuca, Arizona, which trains US military personnel in torture techniques.

We preface this collection of Louie's prison reflections and accounts with his most sustained reflection on jail: "Letter from Imperial County Jail." Though written after all the other pieces in this collection, it offers a vivid and comprehensive statement of faith formed by a lifetime of nonviolent resistance.

Letter from Imperial County Jail

January 2008

It was the evening of October 16, 2007. Fr. Stephen Kelly, S.J. and I were due in court the next day for our nonviolent witness against torture nearly a year earlier. That night we received a call from Major General Antonio Taguba, the man who wrote the Pentagon's report on the Abu Ghraib prison scandal in Iraq. He told us, "History will honor your actions." The next day a magistrate in a Tucson, Arizona courtroom reached a different conclusion, and sent us to prison for five months.

And so I write from the Imperial County Jail in El Centro, California, behind bars for challenging the training of interrogators at the U.S. Army Intelligence Center and School based at Ft. Huachuca, Arizona. In November 2006, Fr. Kelly and I had gone to Ft. Huachuca to deliver a letter opposing the teaching of torture. We hoped to speak with enlisted personnel about the illegality and immorality of torture, but were arrested as we knelt in prayer halfway up the driveway at the Army base.

Mohandas Gandhi said that the cell door is the door to freedom. In freely entering the Imperial prison in India -- and the Imperial County Jail in California -- there is nothing more to fear. It is here that we achieve a transformation, a turning, a *teshvua* (the Hebrew term for repentance). Here we discover the path of resistance: a vocation that we must follow in the midst of empire to overcome the oppression of our brothers and sisters.

I realize this stance in my solitary cell in Imperial County Jail. As the steel doors clang shut, there is a freedom to surrender to God and this universe. There is a freedom to be open to the creative call of compassion towards our global community.

For me it begins here with those in this prison who have been cast aside by our society. Those who have been rejected I see as brothers and sisters, attempting to live good lives in the face of severe social, economic and personal obstacles. So many are here because of the nearby arbitrary border between

the U.S. and Mexico, which is more and more offensive, and a desperate economy in which they seek to survive.

I have come to this prison cell because I was moved to challenge a terrible frontier that my country has crossed into in its ill-conceived and ill-fated war in Iraq: torture.

Each of us has had to absorb the reality that ours is a nation that tortures. By its policies and practices, the United States has retracted the binding commitment it made when it signed the 1975 *Declaration Against Torture*. Adopted by the U.N. General Assembly, the declaration prohibited torture, which it defined in Article 1 as: ³Any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted by or at the instigation of a public official on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or confession, punishing him for an act he has committed, or intimidating him or other persons.²

As stunning as turning on our televisions on September 11, 2001, and viewing the World Trade Towers collapse was seeing, in 2004, startling pictures of raw torture perpetrated by the U.S. military at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.

General Taguba reported at a conference held at the University of San Francisco that the torture photos the world saw were only the tip of the iceberg. He feared for the sensitivities of the viewers if he released the bulk of the incriminating photos.

We have since become aware of the extent of these so-called enhanced interrogation methods -- hangings, electric shock, beatings, waterboarding and other extreme physical, and psychological procedure-spelled out in memos emanating from the White House. They have been used in other prisons in Iraq, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and in renditions to other countries such as Syria (listed by the U.S. as part of the Axis of Evil). We outsource our enemy combatant captives for torture so that we can disclaim any responsibility.

While in Jordan and Syria in the summer of 2006, I spoke with Iraqis who had been imprisoned by the U.S. in Abu Ghraib. (They were dumbfounded to hear that some of us had gone to prison to protest

their imprisonment and treatment.) Meeting them convinced me that what this policy and practice of torture represents has diminished our standing in the worldwide community.

Many say torture is worse than killing in war. It destroys not only the body but also the spirit. This is true not only for the victims, but also for the torturer. By extension, this is surely true for the countries involved. Major religious bodies attest that torture is immoral, sinful, evil, and always wrong.

Alyssa Peterson, a young U.S. Army interpreter, went through training with interrogators of the U.S. Army Intelligence School at Ft. Huachuca. She was sent as part of an interrogation team to one of the U.S. prisons in Iraq. After just two sessions in the cages, she objected, and refused to participate in the harsh interrogation techniques being used -- techniques the Army now refuses to describe and records of which have been destroyed. She became distraught and was sent to suicide prevention training, only to commit suicide shortly thereafter. ("U.S. Soldier Killed Herself After Objecting to Interrogation Techniques," Greg Mitchell, November 01, 2006, *Editor & Publisher*.)

This story stunned me and Fr. Steve Kelly. It induced us to join a protest at Ft. Huachuca focusing on interrogator training.

The commander at Ft. Huachuca, Major General Barbara Fast, had been chief of military intelligence in Iraq. She was stationed at Abu Ghraib during the height of the abuses, yet has never been reprimanded nor prosecuted for her command failure to prevent it. We wanted to ask about the training of interrogators, because we understood that in the summer of 2002, Brig. Gen. John Custer, then second in command of Ft. Huachuca (and who in 2007 succeeded General Fast as Commander), went to Guantanamo on special assignment. Upon his return, he integrated the techniques he learned about at Guantanamo into standard practices. ("New Intel Course Trains Al Qaeda interrogation," *Army News Service*, Feb. 24, 2003). Fort Huachuca is already notorious as the source of the torture manuals used at the School of the Americas -- we wondered what other secrets were still untold?

So we brought a letter requesting a meeting with General Fast, the trainers, and the trainees, but were stopped before reaching the gate. We knelt. Prayed. Were arrested. Now we are serving five-month sentences as federal prisoners. (Three more activists were arrested at the base on November 18, 2007, and

were later sentenced to supervised probation and a \$5,000 fine or 500 hours of community service. Two of the three spent two months in jail without bail while awaiting trial.)

As a nation, we have crossed a line we had pledged we would never cross.

Jesus boldly challenged every barrier to the well-being of all, fearlessly breaking the innumerable taboos, customs, and laws that dehumanize, destroy, or diminish human beings, especially the rejected, the feared, the despised. It is his life and vision that illumined for me the obligation to say “no” to injustice and “yes” to love in action.

As a Catholic Franciscan, I have in turn been deeply influenced by the vision and spirituality of Francis of Assisi who brought Jesus’ vision alive in concrete and powerful ways in his own time. In the thirteenth century, Francis had an enormous impact on society. Caught up at first in the new merchant economy of his father and in the grandeur of war, he became a participant and victim of war. After a year as a prisoner of war in the jail of the conqueror, he came to see the evil of war and of all violence to creation.

Though he had originally been attracted to the valor and heroism of the Crusades, he realized that we could only approach our fellow creatures with gestures of openness and love to all. He rejected the Crusader's violence and passed through their lines to embrace the Sultan. Aware that God's goodness is revealed in all Creation, they shared their common experiences and saw that goodness challenges those who brand all the followers of Islam as violent jihadists. This stereotype and the violent attacks that follow are one of the great scandals of our time. Francis challenged the Franciscan Brothers to live among Muslims and be subject to them in order to learn their truth. We must follow these insights if we wish to realize our deepest yearnings for peace.

The cell door clangs shut. Now I am alone. But instead of trying to escape this solitude, I enter it deeply: *This is where I am.* Here in this empty cell I have begun to experience prison in the way James W. Douglass in *Resistance and Contemplation* describes it: not as “an interlude in a white middle class existence, but as a stage of the way redefining the nature of my life.” I have sensed this transformation, little by little. These days are a journey into a new freedom and a slow transformation of being and identity: an invitation to enter one’s truest self, and to follow the road of prayer and nonviolent witness wherever it will lead.

I am in this little hermitage in the presence of God, in the presence of the Christ who gave his life for the healing and well-being of all. I am also in the presence of the vast cloud of witnesses, some of whom are represented in the icons that have multiplied in this cell, gifts sent to me from people everywhere: Oscar Romero, Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day, Steven Biko, the martyrs of El Salvador, John XXIII. All those who have given their lives to fashion a more human world. At the same time I experience a deep connection with my fellow prisoners and with those outside these prison walls, including those who have sent me many letters and expressions of prayer and support.

In my little, empty cell, I experience a growing awareness of the communion of saints -- and of the possibility of a world where the vast chasm of violence and injustice enforced by torture and war is bridged and transformed.

Loue was released from prison on March 14, 2008. Five days after he was released, Fr. Vitale participated in a “die- in” with hundreds of people in a busy street in downtown San Francisco, California to mark the fifth anniversary of the war in Iraq.

Guilty...And Inspired!

July 8-12, 2002 Louis Vitale went on trial with 36 other human rights activists on trial for “crossing the line” at the School of the Americas at Ft Benning, Georgia in November 2001. He wrote the following during the trial. He was given a sentence of 3 months, with a delay until October to give him time to finish his pastoral responsibilities at St Boniface Catholic Church in San Francisco, California.

Thirty-seven of us have been on trial here in federal court in Columbus, Georgia. We are on trial for entering Ft. Benning during a demonstration November 18, 2001 against the School of Americas (SOA), recently renamed as the Western Hemisphere School for Security Council. The demonstration was in the form of a funeral procession with coffins, crosses and participants dressed as mourners.

Participants in the trial have made clear, in very moving testimonies, what they have experienced in Central and South America—victims or members of families of victims that have suffered atrocities, disappearances, and even executions as a result of the actions of graduates of the SOA. The testimonies brought many of us to tears. It has been reinforcing to us to hear each other’s stories, to understand how widespread the atrocities have been. Judge-Magistrate Mallon Faircloth has seemed to be interested, friendly and sensitive to our testimonies, allowing us to talk freely and at length. Nevertheless, he was able, very readily, to declare us guilty (of trespass).

Before and during the trial defendants and supporters have had wonderful opportunities to build community. Reference has been made frequently to “die beloved community” referred to be Martin Luther King Personally, I have been very inspired by the commitment of each of the defendants, some as young as 18. Many have indicated the cost of facing six months of incarceration for themselves and their families, but it has not deterred their witness. I am also very edified by die large number of supporters who have come to show solidarity. It is a great counter-sign to the destructive role of the SOA We who

have been found guilty now await sentencing. We are prepared and ready to face the consequences for the hundreds of people affected by the toxic legacy.

Coming Full Circle: My Return To Nevada

Fr Louie begins serving a 3 month prison term at Nellis AFB Federal Prison October 16, 2002.

Other than a few trips to Las Vegas in my youth for casino visiting, and a layover at Nellis Air Force Base when I was in the Air Force, my first residence in Las Vegas was in 1968. We Franciscans were invited by Bishop Joseph Green to assess some of the social problems in Las Vegas and suggest some remedies. Out of that came a ten year commitment to social justice ministry in Southern Nevada.

Local concerns included racial segregation and discrimination, welfare rights issues, homeless needs, farm worker exploitation and the plight of immigrants. A community of Franciscans, sisters, and committed lay persons grew around a “Franciscan Center” sponsored by the diocese of Reno.

We soon became more aware of another issue, the militarization of Nevada, most notably of the activities of the nearby Nevada Test Site. Our local response grew to an international effort to stop the testing of nuclear weapons. Eventually the Nevada Desert Experience evolved, bringing thousands to the Test Site for prayer witness and nonviolent direct action. Lots of folks from many religious sources received their initiation into the revered tradition of civil disobedience and their first experiences of arrest and jail. Finally during the Clinton years a moratorium on testing was declared. But now, the Bush administration is planning to resume underground tests.

Thomas Merton noted that the sacred place of the desert, the proverbial “Holy Ground” of indigenous peoples, hermits, mystics, and pilgrims has become, in Southern Nevada, the site of nuclear bombs and casinos. The thrust of the Desert Witness was to reclaim the land as Holy Ground and

eliminate the evil of preparing for nuclear holocaust. In the process of our presence at the Nuclear Test Site we became aware that this is the land of the Western Shoshone people. It has been illegally appropriated by the US government for such evil purposes. It contains ancient burial grounds of the Shoshone and is their ancestral heritage.

We have developed very close ties with the Western Shoshone. We join in their cause to reclaim their land. We have learned to love and cherish that land and have been awakened to its sacredness by their spiritual leaders. In 1979 I was uprooted from the friar residence in Las Vegas to be posted in Oakland, California for fraternal and administrative service to the Franciscan province. I returned to Las Vegas in 1988 and joined a group under Franciscan sponsorship to form *Pace e Bene* Nonviolence Service. We had become convinced that we not only needed to stop nuclear annihilation, but to engage in a revolution in nonviolence that could embrace the world.

In 1992 I was asked to fill in for three months at Saint Boniface parish in San Francisco. I was subsequently appointed pastor and became involved in a monumental project retrofitting the church, school and friary buildings for earthquake survival and for new ministries in the Tenderloin area of the city. I was happy to be able to continue involvement in anti-nuclear campaigns as well as local issues, most notably about homelessness and also immigration. As did many others during the past two decades, we became involved in the struggle of Central Americans for survival from repressive regimes sponsored by the U.S. government. We were most awakened by the deaths of the Arch-bishop of San Salvador, four nuns, seven Jesuits and two female associates, thousands of civilians including children, martyred. Sadly our analysis makes it clear that we are at the heart of the domination network that exploits many of the poor in the world today.

Knowing so many victims of the brutalization in Central America, it has been hard to accept the participation of the U.S. Government in the persecution. It was particularly shocking to come to

understand the role of the School of the Americas at Fort Benning in Georgia and the major part it has played in training those who participate in such oppression. Documents were revealed that demonstrate teaching of torture techniques as well as infiltration, subversion and disappearance.

In November last year I was invited to attend the assembly of Pax Christi in Georgia where it was being held in conjunction with the annual witness at the School of the Americas. My attendance at Pax Christi was recognition of being a “Teacher of Peace” which I accepted on behalf of the hundreds I have worked with in N.D.E., Pace e Bene and other promoters of peace. While participating with ten thousand protesters on the Sunday of the event I was moved deeply by the mourners. They helped us recall the thousands of deaths in Latin America and the shocking awareness that beyond the gates toward which we processed is a training center in which those who perpetrated such barbarity are trained. I was fortunate to find a small procession that was going on around the fence beyond the closed gates to carry the mourning into Fort Benning and towards the school itself. We were arrested, prosecuted, tried and now I am on my way back to Las Vegas to serve 90 days in the Federal Prison Camp at Nellis Air Force Base.

Does all this connect? I feel I am coming full circle. When I first landed in Las Vegas about 1957 I was part of the military forces of the U.S. My consciousness at that time was protecting the freedom of the country and the world.

I joined the Franciscans and emerged in the 60s with a new awareness. I became opposed to war and to the exploitation of poor and marginal people around the world. Martin Luther King and Gandhi were teachers, Cesar Chavez my mentor. The Berrigans and their followers were prods to further engagements. Many wonderful colleagues developed along the way. Los Angeles, Las Vegas, the Bay Area were bases for engaging in the struggle.

Visits to Central and South America, Africa, Asia, and other places of human struggle were part of my pilgrimage, so have been jails. Somehow returning to Las Vegas, to a federal prison camp at Nellis Air Force Base seems a special sign. When I called St. James parish in Las Vegas to tell them of my “new assignment” I was told the choir had sung at the camp the previous Sunday.

It seemed a good omen. I can hear them singing, “We’ve come this far by faith, leaning on the Lord, trusting in his Holy Word...He’s never failed us yet!”

These are indeed dark times. The tragedy of 9/11/01 haunts us. The fell out is enormously frightening. The new Bush policy outlines a global domination that stretches the boundaries of empire—even the domination of space. We are declaring ourselves the only dominating force in the world. This kind of darkness is only cast out by prayer, fasting, and nonviolence action. At least the first two should be available at the Nellis Prison Camp. I attempted some imitation of Jesus’ forty day fast in the desert ten years ago when we first bombed Iraq. There may need to be some repeat in my new sojourn in that Holy desert.

Meanwhile it will be a place to pray, reflect and listen to the Spirit. Where will she lead me? Pace e Bene to all of you. You accompany me in my heart as I begin this brief sojourn.

The Wolf, Fall 2002

A Message from Fr Louie

Louie wrote this message while serving a three month sentence for nonviolent protest action at the School of the Americas at Ft Benning, Georgia. He was released January 10, 2003.

It has seemed an amazing twist of fate that I was sent here to Nellis Air Force Federal Prison Camp. We are adjacent to the Nevada Test Site, scene of my protests over more than two decades. Here at Nellis we are in the midst of a very active Air Force Base where B-52 Stealth and other aircraft practice bombing runs for war in Iraq, and where many weapons, including nuclear, are stored. Being in the midst of such weapons of mass destruction, such violence, calls me ever deeper to nonviolence. Within me is a groaning lamentation that cries over the destruction which such weapons have caused and for that which is now

being planned. Must we wait to see survivors tearing their garments in agony and grief before we also weep?

I am here in prison with 600 men. The “justice system” crushes people, robbing them of the best years of their lives. This also is a terrible violence. At night I look over our dorm and again I weep. My cellmate, while sharing his grief over the break-up of his family, told me, “You can weep in here.” So I weep for them. All of this deepens within me a strong resolve to “set prisoners free,” to “turn swords into plowshares,” to “wage peace,” to “feed the hungry and clothe the naked and shelter the homeless.” I am grateful to be part of a group such as *Pace e Bene* that is totally committed to moving our world from violence to wholeness. Even as I grieve over our present society I have hope, even joy, that a new age will dawn and all those tears will be wiped away and all creation be made new. I thank you all for your most encouraging support and assure you of my grateful prayers. *Pace e Bene!*

Following his release, Fr Louie participated in several peace demonstrations. “Coming out I was able to share the sense of powerlessness experienced at Camp Nellis with huge crowds gathered at Los Angeles and San Francisco to stop the war in Iraq. I shared with the crowds the new hope I have as so many were gathered to set aside the agenda of war and establish the reign of peace.” The Wolf, Winter 2003

Reflections from Muscogee “Monastery”

In November 2005, Louie was arrested while engaging in civil disobedience at Fort Benning at the annual School of the Americas Watch protest.

Franciscan Jerry Zawada and I are spending six months in the Muscogee “Monastery” adding a new vow of “stability” to our vows of poverty, charity and obedience. With the blessing of our provincial ministers we traveled to Fort Benning located in Columbus, Georgia for the annual commemoration of the martyrs

of Central America. Some 19,000 people gathered as the anniversary of the Jesuit martyrs of San Salvador was recalled as well as the four North American churchwomen Ita, Maura, Dorothy and Jean, Archbishop Romero, the people of El Mozote and thousands of other victims.

The procession began with marchers bearing crosses and others carrying black coffins chanting the names of the dead with the entire crowd responding “presenter Jerry and I were privileged to carry one of the coffins.

We marched to an opening where, with help from friends, we slipped under the first of three fences erected to keep protesters off the premises. As we knelt in prayer on the other side of the fence, our military brothers and sisters approached us and took us into custody. Later on the bus, I engaged in conversation with a military police officer asking which of the leaders —Jesus or the U.S. Army — he would follow if called to kill in battle. “I shouldn’t be having this conversation with you,” he said, ending our talk sounding somewhat frustrated.

Now we are living in the “Old Men’s” cell for men fifty years or older. A community is forming. We hear stories of loss — of family, parents, brothers and sisters — and we hear of the desperate efforts to hang on to new family lies of spouses and children. We hear stories of anxious attempts to go through the courts, to win freedom, to try again, or to go forth and deal with retribution for erring. I am reminded of the plea in Isaiah 61, read by Jesus in his opening proclamation (Luke 4) to “Give release to the captives and set the prisoners free.” I would gladly open the door and allow the high cost of prison maintenance to be used to restore families and communities.

We continue mourning as we remember the 25th anniversary of the martyrdom of the four churchwomen killed on December 2 in El Salvador by graduates of the School of the Americas. And we are prayerfully mindful of the four Christian Peacemaker Team members captured in Iraq. Is there is no end to the violence, torture and massacre? We share this with our cellmates and they pray with us, grieve with us. Our nightly Bible study reminds us of God’s accompaniment even in the face of massacre. Some of our supporters sent us this quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer written from prison: “There remains an experience of incomparable value...to see the great evils of world history from below, from the

perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled—in short from the perspective of those who suffer, to look with new eyes on matters great and small (From: *Letters and Papers from Prison*). Yes, we are learning from our brothers and they from us. They teach us of survival and give testimony of human weakness. We share our confidence in their intrinsic goodness in the face of the crushing presence of structural violence so evident in war and prisons. We all grow in hope, even as our Bible study group grows. We even had opportunity to witness to nonviolence, when I mentioned that it seemed some of my envelopes were missing. The entire cell was indignant and insisted that the “thief” be discovered and either volunteer or be forced out by whatever means necessary. When we pointed out the contradiction with the passages we were studying regarding Jesus and mercy and his eagerness to forgive, an amazing transformation took place in which the unity of the community was restored and members professed new awareness of mercy and nonviolence.

We do learn from each other. It is indeed good to be here. *The Wolf*, Spring 2006

Letters from Louie -- First in a Series of Reflections from Prison: November 11, 2007

Louie and Fr. Steve Kelly were arrested at Fort Huachuca, Arizona, headquarters of the U.S. Army Intelligence and the place of trainings of “interrogators” for Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib. On October 17, 2007 both priests were sentenced to five months in federal prison. This letter was sent via David Hartsough.

Dear Friends,

So I am back in prison/jail again... We were arrested for trespass while attempting to take a letter to Gen. Barbara Fast to speak to her and the trainees about the trainings that are happening there, especially regarding “enhanced interrogation” – thus began a year long saga, with 8 court appearances in Federal Court in Tucson resulting in five month sentences for trespassing and not obeying an officer.

So here I am a federal prisoner, housed in the Imperial County Jail in El Centro, CA. We began together in Florence, AZ. We were separated abruptly on Halloween night, Steve remains there. (Who knows why.) I am told I will do my remaining time here.

This is a reflective time for me. I have learned a lot more about torture, especially from the great presentation Bill Quigley made for us from the many reports done by such as Gen. Taguba in Abu Ghraib in Iraq and other horrific prisons & foreign renditions. This built upon my experiences last year in Jordan and Syria meeting actual survivors of Abu Ghraib, as well as torture survivors gathered by Sr. Dianna Ortiz at T.A.S.S.C. in Washington D.C. last Fall. I find myself crying in the night as I draw them into my consciousness. Last week Carlos Mauricio, torture survivor from El Salvador who won a landmark conviction and multi-million dollar judgment against Salvadoran Generals in a Florida Court, and other TASSC members showed up at a late visiting hour. They are on a caravan to the activities at Fr. Benning (and also at Ft. Huachuca) Nov. 18. The cycle goes on. We do feel we have helped raise the awareness of the severity of torture done by the U.S. in our name which has become the scandal of the world.

Last year we were shocked to hear of U.S. torture policies in defiance of Geneva Conventions. We felt exonerated in our protests by the transitions of Attorney Generals. We were notified that a major challenge to a new Attorney General was torture policy (e.g. “Waterboarding”). While aghast at the outcome, we are hopeful that a new vigilance is in the land to be alert – aided by media, new internet information and even popular movies: “Rendition” – and to say NO: “Not In Our Name.” That makes the time here worthwhile.

Meanwhile 20,000+ will gather at Fr. Benning and many at Fr. Huachuca and we will say louder and louder “not in our name – we will not torture any of God’s creatures – never more.” We are most grateful for your awesome support! As Paul saluted his “Beloved,”

“Yours in chains,”

Louie

Addendum: Reflection by Fr. Louie Vitale on the recent Beatification of “Blessed Franz” Jagerstatter, S.F.O., Martyred August 9, 1943

- “They shall not bear arms for any reason” – Saint Francis of Assisi, Patron of Ecology
- “Make us instruments of your peace” – A prayer to end all war
- “Say no to all war.” – Benedict XV, Paul VI
- “Lay down your arms; refuse to kill your brothers and sisters.” – Oscar Romero
- “Say no to all war – never bear arms.” – Cathy Boylan, Washington, D.C. Catholic Worker
- “Courage to resist” – Camilo Torres & Iraq war resisters
- “Stand against all torture.” – Sr. Dianna Ortiz

Veterans Day, November 11, 2007 – Imperial County Jail, California

As I sit in a solitary cell as a federal prisoner serving – along with Stephen Kelly, S.J., [who is serving his time in Arizona] – five month sentences for saying no to torture at Ft. Huachuca, AZ, one year ago, I reflect on the very recent act of beatification by Pope Benedict XVI of Franz Jagerstatter of Austria. Franz bears the name of Francis of Assisi and was a member of the lay order founded by that Saint which spread so widely in the 13th century carrying with it the penitent’s mandate “never to bear arms.” A call so successful that they were credited with bringing to an end – at least for that moment of history – all the wars of that part of the world. (A truly successful peace movement!)

That legacy has passed through many centuries carrying the much earlier mandate of Jesus to Peter to “put down the sword.” As Thomas Merton points out the response of early Christians to war was martyrdom. Francis in Assisi realized that as he sat in a cell as a P.O.W. His namesake Franz Jagerstatter bore that pledge (a vow of nonviolence) to Francis to a Nazi cell in Austria and, as Christ, freely & lovingly accepted a very violent death. On October 26, 2007, Franz Jagerstatter’s life – and actions – received the infallible approval of that same church that canonized those early martyrs. As Francis of Assisi their decisive witness has merited for them the fullness of life in “the Beloved Community of God”

– Franz’s action in spite of the counter urging of clergy in those momentous times was in fact the witness of Christ in the midst of demonic darkness. Franz dreamt that the leaders of his nation were on “a train to Hell.” Franz jumped off – and won the crown of heaven.

As I reflect in my stark cell – which I have “consecrated” in his name (with a little salad oil) I pray before the Holy card of Blessed Franz sent me from the Beatification by John Dear, S.J. This Holy card rests on the metal mirror on the cell’s bare wall together with a card from the Carmel of Reno of many of the great women and men peacemakers of our time. As I pray I ask to be included in their midst and for all of us to have the strength to jump off of the train of horrendous violence of our times. This may sound boastful, but it is the boast of Paul & Jesus’ disciples to be passed on to us as a mandate to bear Christ the peacemaker to our world.

As I pray here in the early hours (we are wakened at 2:30am for breakfast) I feel the deep unity in the heart of Christ of which Franz spoke and draw in all those imprisoned here (mostly Mexican nationals attempting to reap the crops of survival of their forebears) and dare to unite all torture survivors who share such cells in a far more monstrous way.

I am also aware that Francis’ call not to bear arms was not only for his times – as Franz realized – but a call to all of us. We should respond to the call of Benedict XVI: “no to all wars.” As today we go physically, via TV or in our prayers to the graves of all who have died in wars (not only soldiers but in these times, increasingly women, children, elderly) we vow to get off that most lucrative, opulent, highly armed – with world destructing nuclear weapons – train to Hell before we blow not just the train but all of creation “to Hell” – Surely the Patron of Ecology –as the world recognizes as Francis – would urge us all to do – perhaps we can promote the cause of Franz – not only for canonization but as Patron of all who refuse to kill their brothers and sisters in any war or act of violence. Is this not the message Jesus came to bring?

John Dear’s reflection – “The Beatification of Franz Jagerstatter” – is consoling, inspiring and uplifting. Let the words of Blessed Franz guide our thoughts and actions in the way of peace:

“We need no rifles or pistols for our battles (much less nuclear weapons) but instead spiritual weapons...Let us love our enemies, bless those who curse us, pray for those who persecute us. For love will conquer and will endure for all eternity. And happy are they who live & die in God’s love.”

“If one harbors no thought of vengeance against others and can forgive everyone he will be at peace in his heart—and what is more lovely than peace? Let us pray to God that a real and lasting peace may soon descend upon this world.”

“The commandments of God teach us, of course, that we must render obedience to secular rulers but only to the extent that they do not order us to do anything evil for we must obey God rather than men.”

“There have always been heroes & martyrs who gave their lives for & their faith. If we hope to reach our goal some day that we too must become heroes of the faith.” (Aside: General Taguba, hearing what we were doing, exclaimed, “You are heroes!”)

The Bishop of Linz, Austria, home of Franz Jagerstatter, stated during the beatification that Franz is: “A prophet with a global view & penetrating insight.” “A shining example in his fidelity to the clarion of conscience.” “An advocate of nonviolence & peace, a voice of warning against ideologies. A deep-believing person for who God really was the core& center of life.”

Blessed Franz, Pray for Us — give us your vision, wisdom & courage – make us truly “instruments of peace.” (Although among the living his valiant wife Franziska may be co-patron to show us the way!)

Peace and all good,

Louie

Letters from Louie – Second in a Series of Reflections from Prison: December 10th, 2007

Fr. Louie Vitale and Fr. Steve Kelly began serving five months in prison on October 17, 2007 for nonviolent action taken at Ft. Huachuca, Arizona. US military personnel are taught torture techniques at the bases's intelligence school. On November 18, Retired Catholic lay leader Betsy Lamb, Franciscan Fr. Jerry Zawada, and Mary Burton Riseley were arrested at Ft. Huachuca. Lamb and Zawada were denied bail during a court hearing held in Tucson on December 6 and are being held pending trial. Below is Fr. Louie's second letter to the community.

Torture on Trial: One Year Later

Each year a growing number gather at Fort Benning, GA to memorialize the 'martyrs' that have been massacred at the hands of very repressive regimes in Latin America. As we looked at the massacres we were aware of the "enhanced" cruel and excruciating torture that accompanied these deaths. As a greater focus grew on the School of the Americas which graduated many of Latin America's military officers, we discovered there were manuals issued in Spanish used at the school to teach methods of torture. These manuals were prepared at the U.S. Army intelligence school at Fort Huachuca in Southern Arizona. As the scandal of torture spread not just to our Latin American trainees but our own soldiers at Abu Ghraib in Iraq and Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, we became aware that our overzealous desire to engage in the "War on Terror" was stirring our own military and intelligence forces to use the same tactics used elsewhere in what has become known as "enhanced interrogation." The parameters of these are spelled out in a series of memos whose approval evolves from the highest government echelons (even accredited to presidential wartime powers). These circumvent even the Geneva Conventions, a treaty which the U.S. is a co-signer. They also violated our own codes of treatment for enemies and prisoners of war.

Steve Kelly, S.J. and I became aware in October, 2006 that a growing number of people, inspired by participation with Schools of the Americas Watch, were now gathering at Fort Huachuca to raise

attention to the development and transmission of these cruel “enhancements” of interrogation, whatever the human costs. We became aware that the new commander of Fort Huachuca, General Barbara Fast, had been in command of the interrogations at Abu Ghraib and of the atrocities now so familiar to any T.V. Watcher. So we went November 19, 2006, with a plan to visit and interrogate Gen. Fast on the training there.

We were made aware that a young military trainee, Alyssa Paterson, had been trained there. She was sent into the cages twice and committed suicide. The atrocities heap their anguish on both the tortured and the torturers.

We were not allowed to deliver our letters to Gen. Fast. We attempted to negotiate a means of delivery and in desperation knelt and prayed.

We were arrested that day and released, charged with Federal trespass. Then transpired a year of court appearances in Tucson, AZ. We had a faithful group of supporters.

It soon became clear that the government did not intend on airing this shocking behavior carried out in the prisons of Cuba, Iraq and even in “renditions” to the “axis of evil” (eg. Syria).

Our exceptionally well prepared lawyer, Bill Quigley, offered to the court several highly reputable, and graphic, studies, such as the one prepared by Gen Taguba for the army, one by the U.S. Red Cross, one by the A.C.L.U., and others across the board. At the government’s request, Judge Hector Estrada disallowed any of this unchallengeable data to bring out the awful truth.

Steve and I did not engage in this pursuit to try to free ourselves from the penalties of trespass – we felt an urgent mandate on behalf of the community of humankind to raise the visibility of this inhumane behavior being carried out in our name, and causing such suffering to so many and creating untold scandal to the world community. Gen Taguba revealed to us that he did not release the worst of the pictures as he did not believe people could take it. He did tell us that “history would honor our actions.” No, we could not bring this testimony to the judgment of a jury of the American people, but it did get an airing and one year later we are gratified that these efforts and the witnesses such as that given by Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition (T.A.S.S.C), founded by torture survivor Diana Ortiz.

An entirely new awareness is present among informed people not just in our country but in the world. Evidence of this can be seen in the recent hearing to confirm Attorney General Mukasey. The tenor of questions moved beyond the politics of the candidate to the moral judgment of the man who holds us accountable for such human injustices and atrocities. Even one of those engaged in the development of “enhanced interrogation” came forward to say “waterboarding” is not “simulated drowning.” “I was the recipient of this excruciating treatment and it is drowning! Mr. Mukasey has still to convince himself of such evidence but we believe the new awareness exhibited during the exhaustiveness of these hearings will hold government offices and indeed ourselves to recall the “military commissions act of 2006” and restore habeas corpus and the guidelines of the Geneva Conventions and the internationally agreed upon courses of human behavior.

Steve and I are serving our time. Three hundred people gathered at Fort Huachuca November 18 and three more were arrested and will be again raising these questions in the courtroom. Yes – we must agree torture is always evil and is being put on trial in the U.S. And we are saying “No, never again. Not in our name!”

Letters from Louie – Third in a Series of Reflections from Prison

Not in Our Name

I write from Imperial County Jail in El Centro, California, where I am serving five months as a federal prisoner, as is my codefendant Fr. Steve Kelly, SJ at a federal prison in Taft, California. We were arrested for trespass at the US Army Intelligence Center and School at Ft. Huachuca, Arizona, where US interrogators are trained in the use of “enhanced interrogation methods,” considered by most of the rest of the world to be “torture.”

We were motivated by an awareness that General Barbara Fast, who had been commander of interrogation at Abu Ghraib during the time of the international exposure of shocking pictures of

dehumanization of Iraqi prisoners by US personnel. She was then assigned as commander at Ft. Huachuca where these interrogators are trained.

We went asking for an interview with her and with some trainees to bring light to this shocking program on behalf of the US government that operates “in our name.”

We also were alarmed by hearing that Army Specialist Alyssa Pedersen, from Flagstaff, Arizona — who has been through the program at Ft. Huachuca and sent to a similar prison in Iraq — after just two sessions in the torture cages became suicidal and did in fact take her own life.

Ordering our people to participate in torture also makes them victims!

Through the years I have come to know many torture survivors. Among these is Dr. Diana Ortiz, brutally tortured in Guatemala. Her incredibly exposing account – *The Blindfold’s Eye* – has been a principal part of my reflection while here in prison. Her 24-hour horrendous ordeal of torture has caused her hundreds of flashbacks and nightmares bringing her to the brink of suicide, and even twelve years later, caused her to insist she still wished they had just killed her.

Many torture survivors agree: “If you shoot me I no longer hurt — the torture never leaves.” In light of this cruel and inhuman treatment by our own military and those we have supported and entrusted for torture in other countries, we must say “No – not in our name – never again.” We must close every prison or location in which torture victims are held for “enhanced interrogation.” We must examine and reverse any legislation or policy — including White House memos that violate the Geneva convention against torture and say “no to torture.”

In fact, since it is so integral to war, we need to say no to all war. From torture of an individual in a cell or pit to all out nuclear holocaust it is a seamless garment of horror, terror, and inhumanity. We must not cease our protest.

No to torture. No to weapons of mass destruction. No to war. Never again. Not in our name.

Letters from Louie – Fourth in a Series of Reflections from Prison: March 4th, 2008

Liturgy in a Jail Cell: “There Was an Old Man Who Lived in a SHU”

Written from the Minimum “Segregated Housing Unit” [SHU]

Dear Friends,

Many, many thanks for your great support in so many ways during our nonviolent civil disobedience at Ft. Huachuca, Arizona during the action, the long trial process, and during this time of our incarceration. We started our imprisonment at a federal contract facility in Florence, AZ. After 2 weeks I was suddenly called to “roll it up” at about 11 p.m. on Halloween night. We gave a few treats to our cellmates, but got the trick ourselves. Steve held out a few more weeks until moved to a federal facility in Taft, California. I had learned at Columbus, Georgia that some jails and prisons have a “senior section.” As my sister told me, at 76 we need all the help we can get. These sections are quieter (i.e., not riotous) medical services are more readily available, they are aware announcements have to be loud and clear, some of us need lower bunks, etc. The sergeant in charge here said rather than “the camp, I will keep you in the jail.” They have a section for federal prisoners – mostly arrested for smuggling drugs or people without papers at the nearby border.

The section is technically a “minimum segregated housing unit” (S.H.U.) where you might be alone in the cell except for an hour out in the day. If there are no other restrictions on your presence (harm could be done to you, or by you to others) you may have a cellmate and could be in a small group that goes into the day room (which also houses the showers, phone, television, etc.) or on the occasional trip to the yard for exercise (maybe once a week for about an hour).

Since I am a “senior fellow” I am neither a target nor an aggressor. So most of the time I have had a cellmate, usually for a week or two at a time, and then they move off to court, camp, or another federal facility, usually San Diego Metropolitan Correction Center. Presently, we have a group of five or six. As

the elder member, I am “Don Vitale.” The sergeant in charge appreciates the “calm” and hints at keeping me longer. He said he might put me on the payroll (yea!!).

So I am an old guy who lives in a SHU like the nursery rhyme: “There was an old woman who lived in a shoe. She had so many children, she didn’t know what to do!”

The latter phrase describes the place, the old man describes the circumstances. So I am in one of the small two-person cells, sometimes alone, sometimes with another (usually a young Mexican man who stretches my Spanish), and usually part of a group an hour or so a day – sometimes longer.

No, this old man “who lives in a SHU” doesn’t have children, but I do think of these young guys as “mi hijos.” The rest of the verse – “not knowing what to do with them” — is seeing the desperations of their lives (two of the small number here have attempted suicide) some face near life-long federal minimum sentences (mostly for drugs).

I’m sure the older lady who lived in a shoe in the nursery rhyme nevertheless felt blessed by her children, loved, and cared for them, and welcomed with joy their presence and affection.

So yes, I welcome each one that enters my cell or group (and those I greet through the door) and try to help them in anyway I am able. We had a really nice Ash Wednesday “liturgy.” We have some other prayers, liturgy, and bible studies (mostly in the cell), always well received

The “protestor priest” label spread rapidly. Martin Sheen visited and they brought him through the jail and into our cell and that gave us a bit of notoriety. Most of the group are very supportive of our actions, and even most of the staff seem sympathetic, even if they pull out a lot of unapproved mail (clippings, etc.) and hold up mail – but I do not think that it is “cause” related.

I am very grateful to be here. It is a privilege to be able to share at least in a small way in the oppression and suffering of those in prisons and places of torture throughout the world.

Thank you for your compassion and for sharing in solidarity with these victims. May we also grow our efforts to the elimination of torture in our times, especially in the name of our own government.

With Much Gratitude,

Louie

No More War! No More Torture! No More Hatred!

As a child growing up in the era of World War II I accepted the norm (propaganda) of the day, there are enemies out to destroy the good people of the USA and they hate us and intend to destroy us and so we must hate them and destroy them first. I acted this out by entering the U.S. Air Force, prepared to use nuclear weapons to protect the good people (us).

A wise God led me to follow a path of “peace and good,” the path of Francis and Clare and their disciples. I became convinced that war was a great human and moral evil. All creatures are our brothers and sisters and we must protect all life.

I have spent my subsequent half century zealous to end all war. This carried me through the Vietnam War and the Gulf War and keeps me embedded in the struggle to end the Iraq War and avoid interim flare ups and pending Armageddons.

But a new emergent has impaled my heart.

Now we are being led to believe that to really be masters of our destiny we must dominate those with whom we share this planet. To dominate we must subjugate others to our will and corporate plans. To do this we must hate them. Bombs don't do this well, an ineffective model of control. But Hate works! We have discovered an old secret among enemies-- TORTURE! It allows the intimate closeness that devastates the body and the soul. It locks us in the embrace of mutual hatred. It destroys the victims and the torturers and all who prepare the way. It reduces us to “less than humans,” purveyors of the inhumane. While on a delegation last summer to the Nation's Capitol, to convince the Congress of the urgency to use all means possible to end this horribly costly war, we heard the Congress adopt the Military Commissions Act of 2006, an interpretation by the President's advisors that he could define what torture is and his adjuncts could put into practice very inhumane means of torture. While in Jordan following our efforts to reach members of Congress we met with members of the Iraq Parliament. We also met with survivors of

Abu Ghraib. We became more convinced than ever of the need to shut down the School of the Americas, but also all forms of torture presented by our military.

In our efforts to get to the root of this torture we discovered Fort Huachuca in southern Arizona. This is the School of Interrogators--those who obtain the information and prescribe the treatment. We discovered that the commanding general of the School of the Interrogators was the present commander of the prison at Abu Ghraib. We have also been told that the direction of the treatment at Abu Ghraib is set by Fort Huachuca.

Some of us were moved to protest and even to get arrested to expose this abuse. We can only hope for a transformation of our hearts. Further we must make public witness of our resistance and efforts at transformation. Now is the time. We must re-establish our humanity. It is our only hope for peace. *The Wolf*, Winter 2007