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Fr. Louie's letters from prison

John Dear | Jun. 15, 2010 On the Road to Peace

On June 1, Fr. Louie Vitale celebrated his 78th birthday in Lompoc Federal Prison, near Vandenberg Air Force base, north of Los Angeles. A Franciscan priest and one of our great voices for peace and disarmament, he is currently serving six months for crossing the line last November at the gates of Fort Benning, Ga., to call for the closing of the notorious ?School of Americas.? Louie has spent many years in prison for peace. His life has become one long prayer for peace, like his teacher St. Francis. Last year, he visited Iran, Hiroshima and Egypt with me, in the hopes of getting into Gaza. He expects to be freed July 24.

He?s been writing a series of letters from prison, and I thought, in his honor, I would share excerpts from some of his writings. Readers can write to him at: Louis Vitale #25803-048, FCI Lompoc, Federal Correctional Institution, 3600 Guard Road, Lompoc, Ca., 93436.

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My initial experience as a Franciscan was as a penitent, but a strong conviction and love of this pathway of Jesus and Francis engaged me at a very deep level. After novitiate I was ordained as a Catholic priest and took on the life-long commitment to poverty, chastity and obedience.

Major currents were sweeping through society and the church at this time. For the church it was the Vatican Council and the new insights coming from scripture, liturgy, and history ? with new understandings of religious life and the role of Bishops. Most amazing and hopeful was the presence of the Bishops from the emerging cultures ? Latin America, Africa and Asia. With this came new languages, new forms of worship, and new understanding of scripture.

From this came the breakthrough document, ?The Church in the Modern World? and an awareness that the church was a church of the poor. The Spirit was moving within the poor to change history. Many of us experienced this as intoxicating. We Franciscans were especially blessed to have far-sighted mentors who already were immersed with the poor throughout the world. Francis? charism for the poor and for all creation was our legacy. Then came the revolutionary movements of the 1960s. I joined with others in mounting the Federal Court House steps and challenging the U.S. government?s war in Vietnam. We Franciscans were close

to Cesar Chavez and experienced a new form of pilgrimage when we marched to Sacramento under the banner of our Lady of Guadalupe.

When the Vietnam War finally ended, I was in Las Vegas, Nevada, working with farm workers and for welfare mothers? rights. As part of this process, we did a sit-in on the famed Las Vegas Strip, temporarily halting traffic. A journalist covering the event commented to me that though the Vietnam War was grinding down, the nuclear arms race was heating up.

It came to my attention that the leading edge of the arms race was the testing of new weapons, which was going on right near us in the Nevada desert. If we could stop the testing, we realized, that might stop the arms race. So in celebration of the 800th anniversary of the birth of St Francis, the Franciscan community organized a series of nonviolent vigils and actions at the Nevada Test Site, culminating in an arrest action on Good Friday and a joyful welcoming of the resurrection at the test site on Easter morning. A new church was being born.

Over the years, we did succeed in influencing a moratorium on testing that still holds today, and we helped create an outbreak of nonviolence. It is amazing how this keeps growing. The Nevada Desert Experience, almost 30 years old, is still going. It gave impetus to the Pace e Bene Nonviolence Service, which recently celebrated 20 years of providing resources and training in the spirituality and practice of active nonviolence. These days, we face a new breakthrough ? Creation Theology. Christians believe that the all-compassionate love which fills our universe fills all creation, and is the presence we name ?God.? Christians see this presence made present in the human world in Jesus. As we learn more and more, our understanding of this amazing universe enlarges. Some say the giant Hubble telescope has revealed to us more of God?s creation than any previous book, scriptures or story. Francis of Assisi is now seen by scientific and ecumenical ecologists as the first person to understand this all-embracing unity ? ?Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Sister Water, Brother Fire ? All Creation.?

This creation theology fascinates me, even here in this lock-down near the counter sign ? Vanderbilt Air Force Base, gateway of world-destroying missiles and rockets ? as the United States seeks ?Total Global Dominance.? From behind prison bars, but with the confidence of glimpsing the truth which makes us free, we say, ?Not in our name! Not in the name of Jesus.?

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I have been here a little more than two months. I am completing a six month sentence for federal trespass at Ft. Benning, Ga., concerning the School of the Americas. I was sentenced in late January at the Federal Court in Columbus, Ga. I declined self-reporting, even when the magistrate offered no bail given my lack of income. I preferred to start my sentence immediately, knowing that meant some time in county jail(s), and some time in transport. I spent the first night at the county jail in Columbus, then was picked up the next morning by Crisp County Sheriff?s Deputies and taken to Crisp County Detention Center in Cordele, Ga. I went the same route in 2005, but had my trial then after three months in Columbus. I remained the last three months awaiting transportation in Cordele, and then was released. This time, since I had six months to go, I was told by the marshals that I would probably be moved to a federal facility in about a month. This is what happened.

After one month, I was transported by federal bus to Atlanta under ?transit? status. I was there three weeks. Since there is a wide range of prisoners at Atlanta, there is some segregation according to security needs.

I was in the larger population. We had two man cells and were locked down 23 hours a day. We had an hour for showers, cleaning, phone, recreation, TV and commissary. The key is to have money on your books via the Des Moines Bureau of Prisons account which is good at every federal facility. So commissary was available and I had funds for phone calls. You are not allowed visitors unless you have a very long sentence.

After three weeks we were suddenly put on a plane and flown to the transit center at Oklahoma City Airport. The planes taxi right up to the facility. It is large and relatively new, and has about five floors of cell blocks. Again, there were two to a cell, but we had more time in the open area and the rec area.

After a few days we flew out to Victorville, Calif., where we transferred to buses. Ours was destined for Lompoc. We then had a five-hour ride (during which we were handcuffed and shackled). Personally, I found the ride delightful -- through the high desert, across the fertile citrus groves and avocado trees. We then had a beautiful drive up the Pacific Coast past Ventura and Santa Barbara, seeing the beaches filled with surfers and the sun beginning to set in the brilliant blue Pacific Ocean.

After arriving here at the ?F.C.I. Low,? we were processed and assigned to various units. These do not seem to be segregated according to security. There is a fairly tight schedule. When you are confined in your area, your unit is locked except at move times. During the day, most inmates have jobs, at least half of the day. Many are orderly jobs in the dorms. I am assigned as an orderly in the chapel. There are kitchen jobs, such as dining room clean-up, yard jobs, painting, and even barbers.

There are also classes. One must demonstrate high school graduation, otherwise one must participate in G.E.D. classes. I had to attend classes until I received a copy of my transcripts from Loyola High School and U.C.L.A. grad school. We have a nice chapel for worship and music. They have A.V. materials, various classes, Bible studies and worship services, and also an outdoor area used by Christians, Muslims, Jews and Wicca. What is the population here? Ethnically it is ?mixed? (with 1,100 inmates) but at present time it is said that we are 75% Latino. There is a special structure for immigration cases which is very intense and heavy.

The facility has a lot of fences with razor wire, so it would not be easy to escape. They have had occasional ?riots.?

Last weekend was Memorial Day. There were many athletic events and a rather festive meal. I was out for a visit on the day itself, but did see some of the activities. We actually saw ?Avatar? (the only movie I have watched here).

For the most part, the inmates seem friendly, even to an old man. I get a lot of razzing about my mail (especially with my recent birthday), but it seems friendly.

I am particularly pleased with the chapel environment and programs. I came to Lompoc just before Holy Week. Caphucin Fr. Harold Snyder arrived on the scene as an answer to prayer, to preside at the Catholic services, first for Palm Sunday and Holy Week, and then for ongoing Sundays. He has services in ?Low,? at the nice chapel, but also at the ?Medium? and at the ?Camp.? He is a good presider with a real openness to the inmates. Bishop Thomas John Curry, auxiliary bishop of Los Angeles, came recently and officiated at Confirmation and was very gracious and friendly. There are also Christian, Muslim, Buddhist and other chaplains.

The visiting facilities are quite nice both inside and outside with a large grass yard and vending machines. It is a pleasant atmosphere. The weather is mild. Some ocean winds and fog represent the ocean on three sides. Many of us enjoy walking some miles daily on the track. The food, while being a uniform, institutional menu, has a fair amount of variety, including a vegetarian alternative (my choice).

Of course we cannot forget it is a prison. There are restrictions and consequences. The climate in our country focuses on repression and punishment. The sentences seem in many cases outrageously long (with many double digit sentences for nonviolent crimes). The court systems seem arbitrary. The trauma to the families for these long absences seems violent in itself. Here in the midst of Vandenberg Air Force Base, where missiles and rockets of war are launched, we dream thoughts of ever greater efforts at peace and nonviolence. We are ever

ready to share those dreams and join in the efforts to bring about the ?Peaceable Kingdom,? predicted by the prophet Isaiah.

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People ask me, ?How do you cope?? Especially since most of my time in prison in recent years has been for protesting torture. If I start to feel sorry for myself, I think of the suffering experienced in the horrific situations around the world. How can I really complain? As labor leader Eugene Debs said, ?So long as there is a soul in prison, I am not free.? When I think about these situations (often at night in bed), I am able to cope with my own deprivations.

I try to use these experiences and reflections to create empathy with all of those who suffer these horrific experiences. We are all part of this created world. Each person is a sister and a brother to me. Their suffering is my sorrow as well. The gift of compassion grows as I contemplate such misery. My situation becomes a gateway into the compassionate energy that fills all creation and opens me to transforming experiences that I hope to share with the world. And so, for this I am grateful. I value this precious time.

Pace e Bene,
Louie

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To contribute to Catholic Relief Services? ?Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund,? go to: http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn. John will speak on ?Gandhi, King and Day,? at Loyola in Chicago, June 25-26 (see: www.asrenewal.org), and teach a weeklong course, ?Gandhi, King, Day and Merton,? Aug. 2-6, at Ghost Ranch Center, Abiquiu, NM, (see www.ghostranch.org.) John?s latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), along with other recent books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down Your Sword*, as well as Patricia Normile?s *John Dear On Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com. For further information, or to schedule a lecture, go to www.johndear.org.

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