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Priest arrested after breaking into Kansas City nuclear weapons facility

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Oblate Fr. Carl Kabat (Photo courtesy of Jane Stoever)

KANSAS CITY, Mo. -- A priest who has spent almost two decades in jail for acts of nonviolent protest against the country's nuclear weapons complex faces another possible year and a half in prison after his actions on Wednesday.

Fr. Carl Kabat, a 78-year-old member of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, faces three criminal charges after cutting through a fence and entering the grounds of the Kansas City Plant, a major new nuclear weapons facility under construction, to call attention to its building.

Kabat's action represents the latest in a years-long campaign by activists to call attention to the facility's construction.

Protests at the site, which is estimated to cost $1.2 billion and scheduled to be partially operational by early 2013, have been led in part by area Catholics who have also been leading petition campaigns to remove funding from the site.

One of the petitions, focused on developing a plan for reuse of the facility should it be abandoned in light of weapons cuts, was unanimously passed [1] by the local city council in March.

Kabat told *NCR* after his release Thursday that he first entered the property of the Kansas City complex Tuesday, using bolt cutters to make a hole in a perimeter fence and walking through.

Kabat said he then spent Tuesday night on the grounds of the complex until he was found and arrested Wednesday morning.

In an email Wednesday explaining Kabat's action, Chrissy Kirchhoefer, a member of the St. Louis Catholic Worker community who regularly assists the aging Kabat with travel and other needs, said the priest's intent was to celebrate "Interdependence day" by "cutting as much of the fence perimeter" of the Kansas City plant as possible to "allow all of the Holy One's deer and other animals that once used the former bean field for its habitat" to come into the area.

Following his arrest, Kabat had an initial court appearance Thursday before Kansas City, Mo. Municipal Judge Michael McAdam.

Henry Stoever, a local attorney who has represented Kansas City activists in the past and was at Kabat's court

appearance Thursday, said Kabat faces three separate criminal charges, two of trespass and one of destruction of property.

Each of the charges, Stoever said, carries a maximum of six months in jail and a $500 fine.

Kabat's release Thursday came on the 30th anniversary of a dramatic 1982 action by nine peace activists who later served up to a year in prison for an act of civil disobedience against the USS Florida, a nuclear-armed U.S. submarine.

Calling themselves the Trident Nein* Plowshares in reference to the submarine's Trident missiles and the the German word for "no," ballistic missiles armed with multiple nuclear warheads, the activists poured blood on the outside of the submarine and hammered on its hull.

In an email to mark the anniversary of the event Thursday, Art Laffin, a longtime Catholic Worker and peace activist who was one of the nine who took part in the action, wrote, "I have nothing but profound gratitude for doing what we could to declare our independence from nuclear weapons."

Besides mentioning Kabat in his email, Laffin also asked for prayers for Sacred Heart Sr. Anne Montgomery, one in the group of the Trident Nein Plowshares who was recently diagnosed with cancer.

Montgomery, who last spoke with *NCR* [2] about her life of faith in May, also recently completed a year in jail for a 2009 action with four others at the U.S. Naval Base Kitsap, which houses submarines equipped with Trident missiles and is located in Bangor, Wash.

Kabat's action Wednesday was the second in two years by the priest at the Kansas City facility. He also entered the complex July 4, 2011, breaking the window of a crane being used in its construction before being arrested and charged with criminal trespass.

Kabat was fined $100 for that action after being convicted months later.

Kabat, who is known for wearing clown costumes during his protests as a reference to St. Paul's declaration that we are "fools for Christ's sake," is perhaps most well-known for a 1984 action with three others at a nuclear missile silo at Whiteman Air Force Base, about 70 miles east of Kansas City.

During that action, named by its participants the Silo Pruning Hooks plowshares, Kabat and the others took a jackhammer to the silos' concrete and poured blood atop them.

Convicted of destruction of government property, conspiracy, intent to damage the national defense and trespass, Kabat received a sentence of 18 years, but was released on probation in 1991.

In a statement following their 1984 action, the four activists quoted from the U.S. bishops' 1983 pastoral letter, "The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response," in giving their reasons for their action, saying, "Peacemaking is not an optional commitment. It is a requirement of faith. We are called to be peacemakers ... by our Lord Jesus."

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**The original version of this story incorrectly identified the name of the 1982 plowshares group*

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