

Lions and Lambs

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by Neha Sud

Few men go to jail for trying to deliver a letter. Louie Vitale, OFM and Steve Kelly, SJ have had this misfortune.

In November 2006, the two men were arrested when they tried to take a letter of protest to General Barbara Fast at Fort Huachuca, Arizona - headquarters of US Army Intelligence, and more infamously, the training centre for military interrogators. General Fast, the leader of Fort Huachuca's intelligence center, previously served as the Head of Intelligence for the U.S. Command in Baghdad. She was the senior-most officer implicated in the Abu Ghraib torture scandal, but was never prosecuted.

In the aftermath of Abu Ghraib, Fort Huachuca's interrogation training program has received much scrutiny. International experts contend that U.S. soldiers may be instructed in techniques that go beyond the pale of lawful interrogation. General Fast has firmly denied all allegations of torture. "The training on the post is completely consistent with applicable law and policy", she said to The Herald (Arizona) in May 2007. The United Nations, however, disagrees.

In November 2007, following a visit to Guantanamo Bay, Martin Scheinin, the U.N.'s Special Rapporteur on Human rights and Counterterrorism, reported ongoing abuse, lackadaisical judicial proceedings, and other violations on international law. In his published report, Scheinin stated that he was "gravely concerned at the enhanced interrogation techniques [that] involve conduct that may amount to torture and...cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment."

A year before the Scheinin's visit, Frs. Louie and Steve harbored similar concerns about U.S. interrogation techniques. In an act of civil disobedience, they walked through the gates of Fort Huachuca, armed with their letter of protest. An officer at the gates stopped them, offering to deliver the letter. Yet Louie and Steve persisted – they wanted to see General Fast. When they were not allowed to pass, the friar and the priest knelt in prayer and were immediately arrested. In October 2007, they were sentenced to 6 months in federal prison for trespassing.

No Strangers to Prison

During the past five years, Frs. Louie and Steve have staged several non-violent protests against torture. A chaplain for the anti-torture organization, Witness to Torture, Fr. Steve has been jailed many times for his activism. Similarly, as an "Action Advocate" for Pace e Bene, Fr. Louie raised awareness about U.S. involvement in torture, often through civil disobedience. Prior to his arrest at Fort Huachuca, he had just finished serving a six month sentence for protesting the School of the Americas at Fort Benning, Georgia.

Fr. Louie's actions have been inspirational to many. "Louie is no stranger to jails and prisons", said Mark Schroeder, OFM. "He sees the blatant oppression that our country presses upon other nations and he has the determination and faith to partake in non-violent civil disobedience."

"Louie suggests that we need to accept suffering upon ourselves rather than inflict it on others", said David Hartsough, OFM. "He believes our witness would be stronger when we serve jail time rather than paying fines or "bailing out" when arrested for civil disobedience."

The Door to Freedom

Although his activism may be non-violent, in jail, Fr. Louie is treated no differently from hardened criminals. At Imperial County Jail in El Centro, California; he spends 23 hours in a tiny cell, and is only allowed only a small break to shower. Once a week, he can spend an hour outside, in a high-walled dirt area. He is served two meals daily, both through a small opening in his cell door.

Fr. Louie says that the solitude in prison has taught him much. In a Christmas letter addressed to the Franciscan Family, he wrote: “We must first liberate ourselves from our own demons. To do that, we must move into Contemplation. Gandhi said this happens best in the solitary cells of the empire – ‘the cell door is the door to freedom.’ Here, in the ‘Imperial’ jail, I experience the freedom to dedicate myself totally to the ‘Love’ and ‘Reality’ that are the reign of God.”

Making Peace

Being in prison has not stopped Louie from his acts of kindness. Recently, through Cathy Breen, a New York Catholic Worker in Jordan, Fr. Louie made a generous donation to a struggling Iraqi refugee family in Jordan. Breen recalled that the Iraqi family broke down in tears when they realized that the money had come from an American Franciscan who was in jail for opposing U.S. torture policies.

Fr. Louie will finish his prison sentence in March 2008. Upon his release, he plans to continue his struggle against torture. “Steve and I will join [the] Catholic workers in Santa Barbara after our release”, he wrote in his letter. Adding an appeal, he continued, “Join us...may we abandon our plans of war and dedicate ourselves to the non-violent way...for this is the way to the ‘Peaceable Kin-dom’ where the lion lies down with the lamb.”