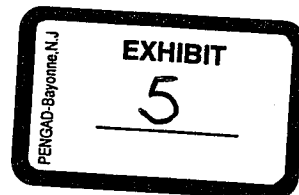


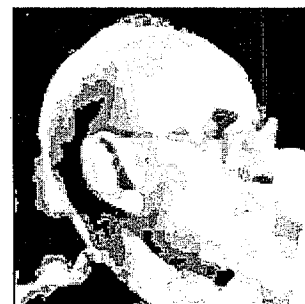
New Years Greetings From a Political Prisoner Father Louis Vitale

STREET SHEET* Jan03



Greetings from the Nellis Federal Prison Camp in North Las Vegas, Nevada. I am spending three months here for protesting at Fort Benning, Georgia last year. The protest was to bring a closing to the School of the Americas located there. Graduates of that school are notorious for torture and assassination of thousands of people in Latin America, including such notables as: Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador; four American nuns who were raped and killed; seven Jesuits and their female associates from the University of El Salvador; and numerous other bishops, clergy and religious leaders; and union and social workers in Latin American countries.

My short sentence of three months is almost a joke within the federal prison system. Most of the 600 men here are here for many years. Federal mandatory sentencing guidelines/have given most of these inmates as many as ten years or more for non-violent crimes - mostly drug activity and some business crimes. There is also no parole from the federal prison system:



Most of the men here are young, typically in their twenties. Most are also fathers. Thus, this system robs young men of a great part of their young manhood. It also robs children of their fathers during childhood and teenage years.

Further, there are almost no vocational or educational programs here. What future will these men have when they leave this system? A recent article in the (November 26th) Los Angeles Times about homelessness pointed to the very large numbers of those released from prison who end up on skid row in Los Angeles. Surely this is true in every city. What other options are there?

One might not dispute that there are criminal laws for drug dealing. But when one hears of these very long sentences - basically taking the best years of someone's life and the years needed by their children, for activity that might in other places or times be legal, something seems out of kilter. As I first heard of some of the sentences here in Las Vegas they were holding elections, and one of the ballot issues was legalizing possession of marijuana. It didn't pass, but might next time. What impact would that have on the man with a ten year sentence for growing marijuana in Humboldt County? Someone will be creating the supply. These are some of the questions I ponder.

The camp here is located on Nellis Air Force Base. Each day we see planes - B-2 Bombers, Stealths - preparing for war in Iraq. The cost of these weapons and the military runs into the many billions. The prison

system is also a billion dollar industry. I think of our homeless in Las Vegas and elsewhere. The numbers are becoming astronomical.

The major problem is a lack of housing. If only we could put the money used for military and prisons into housing, what a difference it would make. We could be saving lives instead of destroying or wasting them. Surely that should be in our thoughts as we celebrate the Christmas season and begin a new year.

I miss very much being in San Francisco and the Tenderloin. I miss the people at Saint Boniface and in our shelter. I miss being with the many activists who are trying to make a better community and world.

My fellow inmates ask me if I'll be back. That is... back in the criminal system. They look at me and say, "I don't think you are going to give up on the causes about which you re so concerned." I don't know how to answer that question. I know I will not quit speaking and acting for justice, in San Francisco and other places. Hopefully we will have more opportunities to have a voice. But if it is necessary for me to risk prison again, then we will have to consider that.

For now I look forward to my return. Some ask me if I'll be going to a half-way house, first (the usual end of a federal prison sentence). Actually, there is one at 111 Taylor Street, right around the corner from Saint Boniface.. But my sentence is too short for that. Besides, I already have a place to live and work after prison.

On January 12th I will be released and will work my way back to San Francisco, the Tenderloin and all the people I miss so much. I do give thanks for the numberless people who have supported me in so many ways. Especially I am grateful to continue to work for justice and compassion for those in need.

I know I will be adding to my list more activity for prison reform, joining with such groups as Families Against Mandatory Minimums - the mandatory minimums that force judges to give such very long sentences. We also need to find the way to reinstate parole at the federal level. Perhaps Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi can help to reintroduce that at the next congress. These actions can come to the rescue of so many spending much of their lives in prison and away from their families. I am reluctant to leave Nellis Prison Camp, and leave so many of my new friends behind, without doing something to help them return to normal and productive life.

FATHER LOUIS VITALE

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- *Street Sheet is a publication of the Coalition on Homelessness, San Francisco (COH) was organized in 1987 to garner the active participation of poor people on both the design and critique of public policy and non-profit*

services that result in permanent solutions to poverty. It is a unique organization in that the driving force is low income and homeless people, working in every aspect of the organization, from the volunteers to the staff and leadership body.

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