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## Living Their Faith: And Those Who Trespass

by Stephanie Salter

Given that the guests of honor face federal prison terms for civil disobedience, there was a fair bit of joking last week at a going-away party for Bay Area Roman Catholic priests Louis Vitale and Bill O'Donnell.

"My speech before the judge will be short," said Vitale, a Franciscan friar.

Pointing at his longtime friend, O'Donnell, Vitale feigned fear and repeated the Apostle Peter's denial of Jesus: "I do not know the man!"

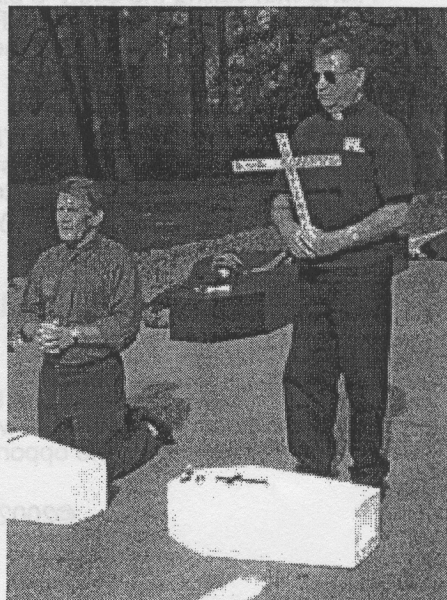
About 150 friends and supporters at the Franciscan School of Theology in Berkeley laughed and shook their heads in amusement and affection. By just about any standard, both Vitale, 70, and O'Donnell, 72, are considered near-saints in their activist communities.

Vitale has garnered respect and devotion as pastor of St. Boniface Church in San Francisco's Tenderloin District and through decades of peaceful protest against everything from nuclear weapons labs to the purported drug eradication program, Plan Colombia. Earlier this year he received a Paul VI Teacher of Peace Award from the international pacifist organization, Pax Christi.

An Oakland diocesan priest, O'Donnell has become something of a legend during 30 years of similar peace-and-justice activism at St. Joseph the Worker Church in Berkeley and through a drug-and-alcohol rehab center, Options Recovery, that he co-founded with Dr. Davida Coady. He logged his first arrest for civil disobedience alongside Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers in the 1960s. The count now stands at 224, many with his pal of 20 years, actor Martin Sheen.

If previous cases are any indication, Vitale's and O'Donnell's social works won't impress U.S. District Judge G. Mallon Faircloth next month in Columbus, Ga.

On July 8, both priests will join 35 other defendants in Faircloth's court to be tried for "crossing the line" during a mass demonstration at the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation -- better known by its former name, the School of the Americas -- at Fort Benning, Ga.



Jesuit Fr. Bill O'Donnell of St. Joseph the Worker in Berkeley with actor Martin Sheen  
(Photo/National Catholic Reporter Online)