



LOVE IS WHAT MATTERS

Writings On Peace and Nonviolence

Louie Vitale, OFM

*Edited by Ken Butigan
Foreword by Martin Sheen
Afterword by John Dear*



Pace e Bene Press

Love is What Matters: Writings on Peace and Nonviolence

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Foreword

By Martin Sheen

Father Louie Vitale is the best follower of St. Francis of Assisi that I know. And he's the embodiment of everything Pope Francis is calling for. So it's wonderful to celebrate Fr. Louie's life with this collection of his writings. I hope they will inspire readers to join his lifelong campaign for peace and nonviolence.

I met Fr. Louie some thirty years ago at the Nevada Test Site, where I used to go with friends to protest the U.S. testing of nuclear weapons. Fr. Louie organized those protests and over the years, tens of thousands of us crossed the line for peace. Later I was arrested with Fr. Louie at the School of the Americas in Fort Benning, Georgia, to call for an end to the U.S. training of military death squads in Latin America. We've been together many times over the years--at peace actions in the Bay Area, with Catholic Worker and peace movement friends, and we even did a few benefit events together to raise funds for the poor and the homeless. I've also visited him many times over the years in various jails and prisons where he has been held for his peace protests. It was always a blessing for me to visit him.

I'm so glad our friends at *Pace e Bene* have brought together some of Fr. Louie's writings on peace and nonviolence as a way to celebrate the life of this great peacemaker. These writings give a glimpse into his Gospel life, his passion for peace and nonviolence, and his solidarity with the poor and creation. I hope these writings on peace and nonviolence, and his shining Gospel witness, will inspire more and more people to join Fr. Louie—and St. Francis and Pope Francis—in the global movement for peace and nonviolence to end poverty, war and environmental destruction, that we might welcome God's reign of peace on earth.

Thank you, Louie, for your peacemaking life and Gospel witness! You are a mighty blessing for us all. May we all strive to live up to your example.

Introduction

By Ken Butigan

In 2012 Franciscan Friar Louie Vitale received an honorary doctorate from the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. The building was packed with students and their families who were celebrating their joyous graduation. The highlight of the event was the conferring of three honorary doctorates. Two scholarly gentlemen collected their award and delivered magisterial exhortations brimming with scholarly exegesis. Then it was Louie's turn. His presentation was short and to the point. "I've discovered in my life," he said, "that love is what matters in the end. And all I can say is: I love you! I love you! I love you! I love you!"

And then, with a final, rousing "I love you!" as he was waving his arms in an exuberant gesture of blessing, he sat down.

The crowd went wild.

For the three decades that I've known Louie, I have seen this love – and people's response to it – in countless situations. Louie is down-to-earth, earnest, passionate and deeply loving, and he exudes this spirit of care and compassion everywhere he goes. He is at home in the streets and in jail – where he has spent years serving time for nonviolent resistance to war and injustice – but also in the classroom, in nature, in his tiny hermitage, and at the dinner table with friends and strangers alike.

Louie has taken seriously the example of Saint Francis of Assisi and the way of Jesus.

A Franciscan priest who has sought to put into practice the peacemaking vision of Francis and Clare of Assisi, he served for years as the provincial of the Saint Barbara Province in the western United States. He was also co-founder of the Nevada Desert Experience – a spiritually-based movement that sought to end nuclear weapons testing at the Nevada Test Site – and Pace e

Bene Nonviolence Service, a training organization where we have been co-workers for over a quarter of a century. He also founded the Gubbio Project, a program that throws open the doors of a local church to the poor and homeless of San Francisco, California.

Louie has long been actively involved in a series of peace movements challenging his government's wars in Vietnam, Central America, Iraq, Afghanistan and many other parts of the world. He has spent long stints in prison for nonviolent resistance to war and torture. For thirteen years he was the pastor of St. Boniface Catholic Church in a low-income neighborhood in San Francisco, California, where he was actively involved with Religious Witness with Homeless People, an interfaith campaign challenging poverty and government policies of harassment against poor and homeless people.

Who is this latter-day St. Francis, and where did he come from?

The youngest of three siblings, Louie was born in Southern California in 1932 and grew up in a comfortable home in Pasadena. His father, who had founded a successful seafood company in Los Angeles after arriving as an immigrant from Sicily as a young man, expected Louie to follow in his footsteps. After graduating from college and a stint in the U.S. Air Force in the late 1950s, though, Louie stunned his father when he announced his decision not to go into the seafood business but, instead, to become a Franciscan.

Louie Vitale was enthralled with the life and work of Saint Francis. The son of a wealthy merchant born toward the end of the 12th century, Francis grew up steeped in the medieval vision of chivalric honor and romantic love. He went off to combat in a war between Assisi and a neighboring city-state. During one of the battles he was captured and spent a year as a prisoner of war.

After being ransomed by his father Francis underwent a profound conversion. In 1208 Francis took to heart the

thoroughgoing demand of Matthew 19:21: Jesus' call to the rich young man to give everything away and follow him. Francis burned with the desire to imitate the poor and the crucified Jesus. He renounced his claims to his family's wealth and espoused "Lady Poverty" or "Holy Poverty" as his lifelong companion. A commitment to live fully dependent on the grace of God, Francis's vow of voluntary poverty was also an intuitive critique of the growing economic and social disparities of his age as it experienced the shift from rural to urban life, the rise of the merchant class, the coming end to feudalism and emergent monarchies and nation-states.

For Francis, God was the Most High who was Transcendent Goodness, a goodness lavished especially on the poor. To become voluntarily poor is to share the plight of the poor but also to share in the life of the God who gives everything. This God is worthy of praise and endless gratitude. Francis became a self-described "troubadour" — not a singer of earthly honor and romantic love, but a singer of the God who loves us with infinite mercy and tenderness. Gradually others were attracted by this vision. Originally contemplating becoming a monk, Francis set off in a new direction as an itinerant mendicant, preaching and witnessing to the life of God in Christ while remaining on the margins of society.

St. Francis vigorously counseled peace between warring city-states and between Christians and Muslims. His devotion to embodied peacemaking and nonviolent intervention is captured symbolically in the story of "the wolf of Gubbio," where Francis is said to have brokered a resolution between an Italian village and a wolf by meeting the needs of both sides. This is even more compellingly demonstrated in his sojourn to Egypt to visit with Malik-al-Kamil, the sultan of Egypt, during the fifth crusade in 1219. In the midst of wartime, he made his way across enemy lines to the sultan's base, where he sought to find an alternative to the catastrophe of war. With this innovative and historically

verifiable adventure in peacemaking, Francis embodied Jesus' words to "love the enemy."

Like Francis, Louie Vitale experienced the dynamics of war. Louie did not serve in a hot war – his enlistment in the Air Force took place between the Korean and Vietnam conflicts – but he was actively conscripted in the Cold War struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union. This struggle came home to Louie in a clear and potentially catastrophic way during a routine mission that he and his crew were on one day along the U.S.-Canadian border. They received orders to shoot down an approaching aircraft determined by headquarters to be a Russian military jet crossing into U.S. airspace. Louie radioed his base three times for confirmation, and each time the order was reiterated. Finally, the crew decided to make a visual inspection. When they did, they saw an elderly, smiling woman waving to them. At the last moment they averted shooting down a commercial airliner. This incident contributed to growing qualms about remaining in the military. In contrast to the jet pilot's life, Louie felt increasingly drawn to religious life.

Louie became a Franciscan and later enrolled in a Ph.D. program in sociology at the University of California Los Angeles. In addition to his religious formation and his graduate studies, he was deeply impacted by the roiling social conflicts of the 1960s and the nonviolent social movements that were active at the time. Motivated by his Franciscan vision of the well-being of all, Louie plunged into a succession of nonviolent campaigns, including the draft resistance movement during the Vietnam War and the United Farm Workers' movement for justice for the migrant poor in California and Arizona. Eventually he worked for the rights of welfare mothers and helped found the U.S. Catholic Conference's Campaign for Human Development.

After completing his doctorate, Louie was transferred by the church to Nevada where, in 1970, he founded the Las Vegas Franciscan Center. He also became the pastor of a parish in a low-

income neighborhood on the west side of Las Vegas. In the late 1970s, he was elected vice-provincial for his Franciscan province, and then succeeded the provincial when his superior was called to leadership of the order in Rome.

In the heady days following the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), Louie became convinced that the work for peace and justice was central to the identity of Christians. This in itself was not unique. In the wake of Vatican II a growing number of Catholic clergy, women religious, and laity drew a similar conclusion and began to transform an insular church that had often supported social structures that reinforced injustice and war into a community prophetically seeking change. What set Louie and a relative handful of others apart was not their theological conversion but how they put it into practice. In his case, he marched and fasted with Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers, dramatically decried the U.S. war in Vietnam, and publicly stood with young men who burned their draft cards and defied conscription into the U.S. armed forces. He supported the nonviolent civil disobedience of Daniel and Phillip Berrigan and lent his support to a range of nonviolent social struggles. His years in Las Vegas motivated him to work with others to launch the Nevada Desert Experience, a campaign to end nuclear testing at the nearby Nevada Test Site. He also co-founded Pace e Bene Nonviolence Service, a small organization that continues today to teach and promote nonviolence through trainings, publications and public actions for peace (see www.paceebene.org).

It has been a great privilege to work with Louie since I came to Pace e Bene in 1990. While we taught together in many settings—including a class at the Franciscan School of Theology in Berkeley, California that we offered over a dozen times, and numerous workshops—I was the real student, learning from him over and over again the power of following the vision of peace and nonviolence into action.

Nonviolent action benefits the world, even as it praises the God of Nonviolence who longs for the well-being of all. Louie's life and work clearly illuminate these truths.

In recent years Louie has followed this peacemaking path to Hiroshima, Cairo, and Tehran, as well as numerous cities and towns in the United States. In a series of speaking tours, he crisscrossed the country to spread the news about the power and possibility of peace and nonviolence. But some of his most powerful journeys have been into the prisons of his own nation. Here he has encountered profoundly inconsolable woundedness as well as a mysterious and transcendent sacredness.

For a world of justice and peace, Louie has been willing to cross again and again into the courts and the prison system as a kind of sacramental response to both the brokenness and the nonviolent potential that suffuses our world. The heart of this book is Louie's prison experience, and a handful of reflections that has flowed from this.

At the same time, this evidence of his own nonviolent faithfulness is nestled among a number of chapters about his great mentor, Saint Francis the Peacemaker, followed by chapters on a range of subjects crying out for nonviolent hope.

Penned on the road, at the margins, and even in jail, the reflections in this book offer a glimpse into the journey of this Franciscan pilgrim for peace and justice.

Part One begins with Louie's own life's journey as he reflects back on his time as a child through his decision to become a Franciscan and lifelong peacemaker.

Part Two reflects on the meaning of Saint Francis's life and work for us today. As a Franciscan, Louie has been imbued with the spirit of the peacemaker of Assisi and has, for half a century, devoted himself to living this spirit of transformation and healing.

Part Three presents a series of Louie's prison letters, written during long stints in jail for a series of nonviolent civil disobedience actions against torture and war. They help to convey

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Louie's fundamental commitment to a world of justice, peace and reconciliation.

Part Four focuses on violence and the potential of nonviolence, in a series of short essays that first appeared in *Pace e Bene's* quarterly publication, *The Wolf*, beginning in the early 1990s.

Finally, Part Five highlights Louie's hope of nonviolence in our times.

Starting with Part Two I offer reflections at the beginning of each of these parts to provide some context for the writings that follow.

May Louie's insights from the past quarter century inspire you on your own journey to peace and nonviolence.

Pace e Bene is grateful for all who worked to make this collection a reality, including Veronica Pelicaric, Ryan Hall, John Dear, and Martin Sheen. We are also grateful for all the support Louie has received over the years for his journey of peacemaking including from his Franciscan community, the Franciscan Friars of the Province of Saint Barbara, Anne Symens-Bucher, Sherri Maurin, Laura Slattery, and many other family members and friends. We are especially thankful for the life and work of our brother, Louie, who has taught us in so many ways that "love is what matters.

PART ONE

MY JOURNEY TO PEACE

Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy.

O, Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love; For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; it is in dying that we are born again to eternal life.

— The prayer of St. Francis of Assisi

1

My Journey: An Introduction

By Louie Vitale, OFM

I was born June 1, 1932 into an Italian Catholic family. Though I was baptized, my parents had some dissatisfaction with the local church and decided not to attend mass. I therefore initially missed out on the typical next steps: religious instruction culminating in first communion preceded by confession at the usual age of seven. About the time I turned 12, though, a close friend of my father convinced him, after much resistance, to attend a Catholic weekend retreat. My father was so impressed by the priest that when he came home, he announced that we were now going to Sunday mass every week.

Within a year I was in a Catholic military school run by Dominican Sisters. There my religious upbringing got a jump-start. I received instruction and made my first communion, confession and confirmation in short order.

I took to all of this with zeal. I was very impressed with a Dominican priest in long white robes. On top of this, there were many stories of priests who, during those World War II days, were like the martyrs of the early church—imprisoned in concentration camps, tortured and even put to death. To me, being a priest seemed like a very heroic lifestyle. But almost all my relatives were in business—mostly fish and liquor—so I presumed that would be my future life as well. Yet those heroes remained ever present to me, as did warriors like General Douglass MacArthur and General George Patton.

Entering high school, I strove to keep up with my studies and follow the faith, though this was challenging since now I had a car and had developed a wild streak with partying companions. Later I would come to learn that I had unconsciously followed in the

footsteps of St. Francis, who also had been a carousing party-goer as a young man.

In my junior year I was talked into running for class president. When I lost I was humiliated, and I even blamed God for this humiliation. At the same time, I also saw it as some kind of sign from God. God was beginning to wake me up.

Until then, my major religious motivation was fear of sinning through human weakness and going to hell. Mass and confession could save my soul. But a new enthusiasm began to emerge. I approached a Jesuit campus chaplain—who had also been my high school principal—and told him of my interest in becoming a priest. He knew of my worldliness, and suggested that I finish college and complete my three-year obligation to the U.S. Air Force.

Once again hedonism won the day. I went back to the partying and jazz clubs, and I served my time in the Air Force. But the call never went away. A deep devotional side continued to develop. I made a retreat at a Franciscan retreat center in Indianapolis and, later, at the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani. Here I was among contemplative Trappist monks, including the prolific spiritual writer Thomas Merton who had also turned from a profligate life to follow a mystical call.

The starkness of their vow of silence frightened me. The warmth and openness of the Franciscan center, though, attracted me. I picked up a vocation book at the center: “If you have a love of God, a desire to serve the poor as did Jesus, and if you have a sense of humor...” This spoke to me.

I signed up.

When I told my parents of what I had decided, my father was dismayed. When he said, “All this I will give to you...”—meaning the fish business—I remembered Jesus’ temptation in the desert. I persevered in following the course. When I came to the end of my stint in the Air Force I faced three options: re-up with the Air Force, apply to Harvard for a business degree, or join the

Franciscans. The Holy Spirit did not leave me in confusion. I joyfully entered the Franciscan order.

As I learned more of St. Francis—his profligate years, his attraction to be a heroic knight, his experience of war, his year as a prisoner of war and his subsequent illness of body and spirit—today we would call this Post Traumatic Stress Disorder—I found myself following his path in a profound and transforming way.

My initial experience as a Franciscan was as a penitent. How could I regain good standing with God and achieve “sanctity” – from spiritual hobo to fervent disciple? The first two austere years were focused on submitting to discipline, putting on the Franciscan habit and taking up the religious life. I recall the fear coming back, fear of failing to live up to this way of life—the sins we might commit, not only of commission but also of omission. I was struck by St. Paul’s confession, “The evil I would not do, I do; the good I would do, I do not.”

But a strong conviction and love of this pathway of Jesus and Francis engaged me at a very deep level, compelling me to go on. After my 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. The Second Vatican Council and the new insights coming from scripture, liturgy, and church history—new understandings of the religious life and the role of bishops—were transforming the Roman Catholic Church. Most amazing and hopeful was the presence at the council of representative bishops from around the world, including Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Their engagement opened the global church to new forms of worship and new understandings of scripture and of God’s message. The insights they brought powerfully informed the council’s breakthrough document, “The Church in the Modern World.” It proclaimed that the church was a church of the poor and the oppressed. The Spirit was moving within the poor to change history. Many of us experienced this as dramatically

transformative. We Franciscans were blessed to have far-sighted mentors who already were immersed with the poor throughout the world, attempting to live St. Francis's charism for walking with the poor and for all creation.

Then came the powerful social movements of the sixties. By this time, I was out of seminary and sent to teach sociology at our college at San Luis Rey, and engaged in doctoral studies at UCLA. I also spent some time at Berkeley, where our theology school had located to be part of the Graduate Theological Union, an ecumenical community of seminaries, and to form connections with the University of California Berkeley (UCB), where the Free Speech movement had stoked student activism on campuses across the country. This was a heady and powerful atmosphere, and I got involved in the emerging Anti-Vietnam War.

I had come a long way from my U.S. Air Force days. I was now counseling draft resisters and joining public, nonviolent actions for peace. At the same time, I was fortunate, through the Franciscans, to get close to Cesar Chavez, the co-founder of the United Farm Workers, and to work with the migrant poor for their rights, including marching in a new kind of pilgrimage through California's Central Valley to the state capitol in Sacramento under the banner of our Lady of Guadalupe.

When the Vietnam War finally ended I was working in Las Vegas, Nevada with farm workers and for welfare mothers' rights. We did a sit-in on the famed Las Vegas Strip, temporarily halting traffic there.

About that time, I had a conversation with a journalist that had a profound impact on me. He said that, even though the Vietnam War was over, the nuclear arms race was heating up. As I reflected on this it became clear to me that one of the leading fronts of that titanic competition was the Nevada Test Site, only 65 miles north of Las Vegas. Hundreds of nuclear bombs had been detonated there for thirty years, and more were being

exploded on a regular basis still. Yet very few people in the United States knew this—or, if they did, seemed to care.

We reasoned that, if nuclear testing were stopped, the arms race itself would stop, because testing was a necessary step in the development, deployment, and maintenance of atomic arsenals.

So on the 800th anniversary of the birth of St. Francis—in 1982—the Franciscan community organized a new form of liturgy: a series of nonviolent vigils over 40 days at the Nevada Test Site culminating in a civil disobedience action in which several dozens of us were arrested at the gates of the facility on Good Friday—and a joyful welcoming of the resurrection at the test site on Easter morning.

Over the years we succeeded in influencing the establishment of a U.S. moratorium on testing that still holds, and contributed in our small way to the growing nonviolence movement.

Nevada Desert Experience has celebrated almost thirty years and is still going. It gave impetus to the birthing of *Pace e Bene* Nonviolence Service, which continues to provide resources and training in the spirituality and practice of active nonviolence.

It has been a great grace to be part of a growing movement for nonviolent change as we happily join the journey of the peacemaking Jesus and the band of Francis and Clare, Dorothy Day and Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Cesar Chavez, and so many others. In many tongues we celebrate the emergence of a new nonviolent order for justice, peace and the healing of the earth.

Hallelujah! *Pace e Bene!* Peace and Good to all!

Fr Louie, wrote this article on his life's journey while he was serving a six-month prison sentence for his prayerful, nonviolent protest action at the School of the Americas at Ft. Benning, GA in 2010.