

RELIGION

Protesters Mark Atomic Bombings at Nevada Test Site

By JOHN DART, *Times Religion Writer*

NEVADA TEST SITE—The desert normally calls to mind images of danger, loneliness and death, but Jews and Christians remember it also in their traditions as a "place of purification, a place where they could see God."

Father Henri Nouwen, a Roman Catholic priest from the Netherlands, invoked those pictures of wandering ancient Jews headed for the "promised land" and Jesus tempted in the wilderness as another group of protesters prepared to be arrested this week for trespassing at the U.S. nuclear weapons testing grounds here.

'August Desert Witness'

The entrance to the Nevada Test Site, 65 miles northwest of Las Vegas, is intermittently busy with drivers of cars and trucks flashing identification cards to security guards. Announced underground explosions occur roughly every 16 to 18 days.

But after prayers, hymns and a hike in 100-degree heat to that entry point, marked definitively with a white line painted across the road, 17 men and women stepped over the line Wednesday in order to be arrested. Nye County sheriff's officers permitted them to kneel in prayer briefly before handcuffs were applied.

Eight peace groups co-sponsored the "August Desert Witness"—an outgrowth of protests begun in 1982 during Lent by Franciscan priests from Santa Barbara, Calif.

The orderly, four-day protest against nuclear arms testing at the site was one of the more religiously

imbued protests this week commemorating the 40th anniversary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan.

On Friday, the final day, 45 persons out of 172 present were arrested, bringing the four-day arrest total to 120 persons, including peace activists Daniel Ellsberg of Pentagon Papers fame and Jim Wallis of the evangelical Sojourners community in Washington. Most spent 24 hours in jail at Tonopah.

Father Nouwen said he avoided arrest because he is a Dutch citizen. A diocesan priest from Utrecht, Nouwen has become a popular author and speaker on spirituality while teaching at Yale and Harvard divinity schools. His appeal in liberal Christian circles has grown as he has sided with the religious left in Latin America and with the refugee sanctuary movement in this country.

Resigned From Harvard

Nouwen said he resigned from the Harvard faculty last month in order to move to France and join next week an international network of supportive communities for the mentally handicapped.

"However, I wanted to be here first to make a pilgrimage with peacemaking people," Nouwen said.

In leading meditations with the 60 people who walked the two miles from the highway to the test site entrance, Nouwen prayed that "a place of destruction might become a place of renewal" and that the presence of religious protesters would help workers at the test site

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Protesters walk to the entrance of the Nevada Test Site, left; Fathers Henri Nouwen, left, and Kevin Queally greet each other at start of the march.

to think about their roles in nuclear arms development.

Father Barry Stenger, a Franciscan who was on the staff of St. James Catholic Church in a predominantly black section of Las Vegas from 1978 to 1982, said that he knew many test site workers who were bothered by the nature of their work. "A lot of them say they try to keep from thinking about it because this is what is putting bread on their tables," he said.

For many participants, the acts

of civil disobedience or support they gave to those who did invite arrest were methods to stir greater discussion of the morality of the arms race.

Two Lutheran pastors from California, the Revs. Warren Nielsen of Paso Robles and Lance Poldberg of Morro Bay, said they came to Nevada to "help educate" churchgoers back home about the issues. "We're stewards of the earth, and we need to be healers," Nielsen said.

But Nielsen said that he and his

colleague, both wearing clerical collars and sun-shielding straw hats, would not seek arrest. "So many people are up-tight about our being here at all that it would be counterproductive; a lot of people feel we're helping the Russians by

being here."

The protest, however, has not been anti-American. The demonstrators and arresting officers were mutually cordial and, at times, joked with each other. Demonstrations

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tors waved to employees driving out of the site.

Though the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were the occasions for the test site commemoration, Dr. John Miller of Rogue River, Ore., one of the demonstrators, said he was glad that the demonstration did not include self-flagellations over America's dropping of the bombs.

"I was a medical officer in the Navy on a ship in the Pacific and I don't remember any feeling of guilt then. A lot of people born since World War II don't know how the government taught us to hate," Miller said.

Rather than lamenting the U.S. decision, Miller said, "The problem is how not to do it again."