

Prison Witness: Encountering the Living Jesus

When I went into the prison for the first time as a Eucharistic minister, I was terrified. Locked up! I would be at the mercy of the staff just as the prisoners were. Even the clearance process felt like a total invasion of my privacy. I hadn't been able to go through with it a few years earlier. This time, I did it anyway because I was being obedient. I owed it to God. Anyway, He wasn't going to let me off the hook. It was payback for a gift: my early experience of unrelenting rejection for being different resulted in my heart being especially open to those who are considered unworthy and 'less than'. I knew, in my head, this was God's way of giving me perspective and detachment from my own feeling of powerlessness. I didn't expect to 'feel good' about it. I anticipated, after awhile, I would find the fit for this new ministry would be less than perfect, I would be drained, and I would have to stop. Now, three years later, going 'inside' to be with the prisoners has become the greatest blessing in my life, the spiritual highlight. How did this happen?

One prisoner, John, showed up in the chapel the first time I went in with two other team members. In the early days, not too many guys knew we were coming. News, generally bad news, is conveyed by rumor in prison. When any of our ministry team expressed doubt as to whether we should continue going in with so few showing up, I said with absolute certainty "God wants us to be here. It doesn't matter how many prisoners are here. He doesn't care about numbers. We are meant to be here, even if it is just to greet the prison staff."

That first time we met, John and I looked at each other with instantaneous mutual recognition of God's sign that we were, as his children, brother and sister. We were wearing the same shoes! I mean, the exact same design and color in different sizes. At the same instant we both shouted "Prison shoes!" John looked me right in the eye and said "Why are you here?" Honesty was extremely important to John, who, like all the other prisoners, was often manipulated and lied to, treated as unworthy of the truth. I always speak the truth to these guys. Going 'inside' has helped me to understand how important the truth is. So I simply said "I'm being obedient to God. He wants me here. I respect his will because I know he has something good in mind for you guys. And he wants me to have a role in it in some way. I said yes." John smiled. The next time we met, John showed me something. It was Chuck Colson's book, *Loving God*. John, that perceptive man, simply said "You should read this. And tell the others about it." I said "Sure. Thanks." I knew about Chuck Colson's Prison Fellowship. I had heard it discussed by ex-prisoners in Ireland. But, what was the special message in this book? Chuck indicates this is not a self help book, but an illustration of how his life was transformed and he learned to serve others by acknowledging the simple yet profound truth that we show our love for God by obeying him. Right on, John! Spiritual lesson number one.

Early on, when we still had a mere handful of prisoners showing up, one of the ministry team expressed concern over whether we should be giving John communion. Was he really Catholic? My heart was breaking at the thought of not giving communion to my brother. I was already marshalling my arguments. He understands what it means to be 'in communion' in order to receive, and he accepts the conditions as his conscience dictates when he comes up to receive. I'm not prepared to send someone away who needs to be gathered in so much, who has wounds which need healing resulting from

being cut off from nurturing community in the middle of a Hell on Earth, and who is seeking Jesus. But, before the words were out of my mouth, John simply said, with the greatest conviction, “It’s alright. It’s been worked out.” The doubt vanished, ending the focus on being right and ‘perfect’ and putting it on mercy and healing. Thanks, John. I know God sent you to us.

The chaplain at our prison is a fundamentalist and, especially in the beginning, was not too sure that Catholics were respectable Christians. For the first year or so, the staff would carefully check to see that we were on the official ‘list’ at the entry checkpoint. We would often be kept waiting a long time. There was a good chance one of our names wouldn’t be found, and the other might have to choose whether to go in alone or not at all. One time, the other team member couldn’t get through, and I chose to go in by myself because I couldn’t imagine disappointing the prisoners. Not when the prisoners always thanked us for coming in and one prisoner, another man named John, had actually come up to me on more than one occasion and said “This is the only time during the whole week I’m treated like a human being.” The prisoners knew they could trust me and so used that opportunity when I went in alone to discuss the conditions for receiving communion in depth and wanted to be assured that I would give communion to someone who came up to receive having made that decision. What an act of trust on their part! How could they trust at all surrounded by such a war zone, at the mercy of the meanest, basest bullies among fellow inmates or staff. I realized that I was creating a ‘sanctuary’ where dignity could be restored and where possibility of something entirely different could emerge, including forgiveness, redemption, and starting over. What a privilege I have. What an opportunity! Our society seems to want to continue to deny such things to these guys even when they get out, having served their time.

The continued social ‘punishment’ of ex-prisoners is devastating. Yet, when our team goes in, we can only focus on the interaction we have in that moment of encounter with prisoners ‘inside’. We aren’t allowed to give any information that would make it possible for the prisoner to contact any of us personally when getting out. And, respect for privacy means we never ask why someone is there. In fact, when prisoners decide to share that information, their stories are extremely varied, although they tend to have in common the inability to generate the resources to fight a far more powerful adversary. A disproportionate number have one or more of the following characteristics: poor, young, African American, raised without responsible adult role model and advocate. The mentally ill and the poorly educated are disproportionately represented as well. Few are violent, despite popular stereotypes. Although, all are at the mercy of the minority who are violent. The staff do not interfere but run for cover when violent outbreaks occur. In other words, it’s a living hell. On the other hand, these guys no longer have the illusion of being in control and their only hope is, literally, the Christian message. Which we have the opportunity to illustrate, reflect, and deliver in that sanctuary. And, by the way, volunteers are treated with special respect by all the prisoners, whether they join us or not. I have come to realize that this is because prisoners cherish the opportunity to be treated like human beings, if only for a short time. Unlike the prisoners, members of the ministry team are safer ‘inside’ than on the street.

In fact, we are both bringing Jesus in and encountering Him inside. It is such a privilege to bring in the body of Our Lord and His Word. I think of bringing the sun into a very dark place where the sacramental nature of life is denied, to heal and liberate heart

and soul. And then, we encounter Jesus in this unlikely place. “I was in prison and you visited me.” Jesus was a prisoner, totally at the mercy of small-minded bullies and punitive tyrants who cruelly mistreated him. What an honor to serve those who have every reason to despair and fear such powerlessness and treat them with respect and compassion, practicing a message of hope and salvation. We view each other the way Jesus sees us, filled with gifts and possibilities. We offer those gifts to each other.

I became especially aware of a great need to create a spiritual anchor for each prisoner in preparation for his release. So, we initiated the Catholic bible study, after being asked by several guys, to provide just such a foundation. The idea is to feed the Catholic guys, who have long been neglected spiritually in this prison, and to welcome anyone who wants to attend. We do Sunday lectionary study, to make the Sunday service more meaningful and bring the readings to life. The Catholic sacramental perspective applied to challenge the way we live here and now brings Jesus literally into our midst in an essential way. We recruited volunteers for the bible study from another parish. It took quite awhile for them to get cleared and, meanwhile, I had arranged for us to use the Saturday time slot that became available. Not wanting that slot to go away, in that interim I went in each time, bringing in one of the Sunday people but doing the preparation. The prisoners taught me a lot about doing bible study in a short time. At first, I thought committing all those Saturday afternoons, when I ordinarily do errands or take a much needed break from work, would take a toll. Then, I saw what happened in the bible study. Men came with very different levels of knowledge of the bible and attitudes toward it, a particular challenge. I struggled to find a down-to-earth program that was built on sound exegesis and awareness of catholic spirituality applied to challenge and encourage daily lives and settled on Emmaus Journey. The honesty and need could be startling. Questions like “Can a man really have a heart of stone?” and “How can God keep me safe in here?” take my breath away. In one lectionary study, we had a particularly intense sharing about the twenty third psalm. It was the last time I saw one of the prisoners who asked particularly challenging questions, who was moved to another facility. Months later, an envelope was relayed to me via various priests and the parish office. It was a card for me hand drawn by that very prisoner of the challenging questions, illustrating the twenty third psalm. He portrayed himself walking through the valley of death and arriving on the other side. In the letter he told me how much that particular bible study alone, let alone our commitment to come back week after week, had meant to him. How it had changed his life. The card is one of my greatest treasures.

We’re still trying to find enough volunteers to go in every Saturday and completely establish the bible study program. As we set up the table outside the parish to do another recruitment drive, one of the prisoners who had just been released walked up to us excitedly. He couldn’t believe that he would actually see not just one but a few of us outside the church the first time he went back to mass. What joy to see our brother truly free! Meanwhile, the Chaplain and staff are far more welcoming, as we show that we are there to stay.

A few months ago, I was asked to put together an intergenerational healing seminar series for a neighboring women’s prison. I’m sure I’ll meet Jesus in a new way there as well. In the end, as the prisoners thank us so graciously for coming in each time, I know I get as least as much out of those visits as they do. I get to walk with Jesus, to bring him with me, introduce him, and meet him again in each one of those guys ‘inside’.