
I was in jail, and you came to see me

“To be a Christian leader is to promote healing and work for peace; forgiveness is an essential element in this process. There are wonderful stories of forgiveness that accentuate the healing that it brings.”

(Marist Voices, chap.5 – Br. Peter Carroll)

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Throughout my life as a Marist I have been a teacher of children and young people of different ages, but mainly of primary school children. My apostolic action outside the classroom has been centered on youth ministry at the provincial and local levels. At present I teach in a primary/middle school full time, and I continue to lead the youth ministry in the school at Villalba. In addition to these posts, I have been a volunteer for more than twenty years in prison ministry in various prisons in Madrid.

MY WORK. For the last 10 years I have given 25-hour training courses in prisons, about ten courses per year. The PPS course addresses support for the risk of suicide, a risk for some prisoners when they fall into depression or borderline anxiety. The First Outcomes course helps them not to be broken by the system, but particularly not to reoffend. I have also conducted courses on gender violence for inmates who have minor offences in this area. And finally, courses on smoking for inmates who want to give up tobacco and other addictions.

WHY DO I GO? I go into prisons because I meet vulnerable prisoners in need of support. In prison you meet people who were mistreated and abused in their childhood and have not been able to overcome that trauma. You meet people who succumbed to drugs and became slaves to illegal substances, losing their freedom to make decisions because of the effects on the human brain – people who chose the easy path of robbery, extortion or illegal trafficking and have now lost everything.

These broken lives, these twilight existences, sometimes with attempted suicide, are there on



our courses. We create an atmosphere of trust, where the prisoners meet each other face-to-face. Sharing their pain and the mistakes they have made becomes for us the light that enlightens us and encourages us to return. In each session we feel that our lives have been worthwhile since we have helped them maintain hope.

WHAT DO I LEARN? I think the first lesson learned in prison is becoming aware of how unfair the world is. Above all, this is because of laws and legal systems under which only a few can defend their innocence, and also because of the lack of opportunity for many to develop as individuals. Why were some born with abusive parents and I was born with parents who loved and cared for me?

But the lesson par excellence learned session after session is seeing the inviolability of human nature. Neither delinquency nor circumstances of deprivation annul inherent dignity. The human being in essence is unlimited, permanent, inextinguishable love. Those of us who are fortunate enough to participate in this sort of work can see this because we see prisoners who rebuild their lives and support their cellmates in any way they can.

TOTAL FREEDOM. For me volunteering has always been a team effort. In a short time we realised the need for a group that could bring together people interested in volunteering and raise funds as prisons are increasingly far from centres of population and expensive to get to. And we called it "Total Freedom". The dozens of young people, teachers from our school, parents of students, and former students who have participated in this volunteering have been an extraordinary gift to me. Most of them are impacted by the experience of relating to the prisoners. They become aware of the prejudices that society teaches us about them and they realise that everyone needs

to be listened to, helped and feel loved... A good number of them say, “this volunteering changed the way I see life and the way I understand my career”. Truly, prison helps our way of being and seeing others.

COME. We often forget that at the end of life we will be examined on love (St. John of the Cross); “I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was naked... I was in prison and you came to visit me” (Matthew 25: 35, 36). Jesus was not only a prisoner in the dungeons of the Sanhedrin, but also a prisoner executed as a criminal. Jesus identifies with the least of these people and asks us to do the same. It was the condemned man Pranzini who attracted Therese of Lisieux to the missionary-life.

That is why we Marists also have a useful place in which to teach: prisons. In them, most of the people are young people. And “in this way, many small people, in small places, doing small things, can change the world” (Eduardo Galeano). It is worth joining the project of making a new world!



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If you would like to share your ideas, reflections, or experiences about servant and prophetic leadership with the Commission as a result of these reflections, write to fms.cimm@fms.it

