

# A Temple Where I Feel the Presence of Christ

by John Bolduc, SM

The Suffolk County House of Correction (South Bay Boston) houses fewer than 2,000 detainees in 27 different units – segregation, solitary, general population, women, and men, as well as two ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement: immigration issues) sections.

Perhaps because it is Boston, priests are given open access and are welcome throughout the institution. They are free to meet, speak, sit, pray, and conduct services with detainees. They even hear confessions using the opening to the cell where food is delivered.

Visiting detainees is a pleasure for me, if only because they are so receptive (a welcome distraction, perhaps). Their openness, sincerity, honesty, and basic goodness is humbling. “When you have lost everything, you have everything,” a good Marist priest once told me. Here is a temple where I feel the presence of Christ.

In the House of Correction, there is no need for pretense, or maintaining appearances – their reputation taken away, their jewelry and wealth taken, their fancy clothes and freedom taken – all they have left is themselves. With a priest they are authentic. Their hearts are truly the Temple of the Holy Spirit. *He [God] was in the woods and the sun came up. There was a river below and mist in the cool of the morning. I felt so close to God. I knew God was with me.* Didn't St. Teresa say that wanting to be with God was already being with God? Of course, some are satisfied with shaking hands and saying hello; but even these are extremely respectful. Maybe they feel that they do not want to mess with God!

Most, really and truly, want to talk about what is important in life. St. John, chapter four, the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman, is always a good place to start. It can capture the interest of seven men around a dining table for 45 minutes, especially the part about Jesus not being ashamed of the woman, not caring about losing his reputation by being caught

talking with this unclean, Samaritan, woman! Remember, to convince her that He was no better than she, it was He who asked for water-from her. He did not come as superior, but as inferior.

The detainees also want to laugh. They can take a joke and be quick on the uptake. “Father, nobody even smiles in this place. It means so much to laugh with you.”

Without jewelry they love the rosary. Little white plastic rosaries. They are used as decorations, which is hardly something bad. I also suspect they may be used for identification purposes. Two around their neck means one thing; brown (against the rules) means something else. Since many are not Catholic, I give them a sheet with instructions. Often I say, “for the beads between the large spaces, say ‘God the Father, bless us.’” I explain “us” is me, their cell mates, the guys who messed up their lives, their girlfriend who may or may not be faithful, and their little boy or little girl. I also say, “on the beads between the little spaces, just say ‘Jesus loves me.’” I tell them to do this before they fall asleep. In this place, that is such a nice thing to think about at the end of the day.

I confess that visiting the ICE unit (immigration issues) is the most painful. Not that they are badly treated in detention here, but there is fear in their eyes, dreams have been destroyed, relations shattered, the future unknown. Will they be returned to the unimaginable terror from which they paid such a high price in the first place to escape? **If you have ever wanted to look at the face of Jesus on the Cross, visit an ICE detention center.**

I write this at a time when the Church is being shamed again due to clergy abuse of people. My own ministry has never been so rewarded. So I say, “Visiting detainees is a pleasure.” Somehow being convinced that God's love and mercy is being channeled through the Church is a pleasure. Isn't this what the Church is supposed to be doing? And it is doing! For example, lay Catholic women and men



conduct religious services on Sunday in as many units as possible. One Catholic judge volunteers with us. A detainee said: “I go to Church services and see the guy who put my brother in prison.” There must have been a reconciliation of some sort, because he looks forward to the Sunday service.

Someone once said that there is a sufficient amount of evil in the best of us and a sufficient amount of good in the worst of us, that it hardly behooves any of us to judge the rest of us. That is true on every city street corner as well as in every unit of a correction facility. I wonder, if clerics were more ministers of Mary's compassion and understanding and less rigorous in condemning others, maybe people would be more forgiving of others' crimes.

The smallest amount of self-knowledge equips us to say: “There but for the grace of God go I.” So when the young lady with the big brown eyes looks into mine and says, “I try so hard to be good,” I recognize that it is often drugs that is the demon she cannot defeat. Then I have to wonder why she is in detention for dependency and another more advantaged person is still free and in private treatment for opioid dependency. The role that race plays in our justice system, and the role our environment and history play in shaping our character reminds us that none of us is self-made and entirely independent. The same human blood runs through each of us. Somehow, we are all the children of the one Father, brothers and sisters in the same human family, with Jesus our brother.

continued on page 12