

My Prison Ministry – An Instrument of Mercy

by René Iturbe, SM

As a Marist priest, I serve the Archdiocese of San Francisco in the ministry for Restorative Justice. The Mission Statement reads: “We provide people affected by crime, victims and offenders within our communities, support to heal through prayer, prevention, intervention, and guidance. We believe that peace and justice are attainable when both parties receive the services needed to heal and advance themselves within our society.”

My ministry calls me to plan and present retreats and liturgies for families of the incarcerated and to call upon volunteers to help. My main focus is spending time with inmates in the jails. How do I spend this time? I meet with an inmate usually in an interview room where there is privacy, or sometimes at their cell door, or at a table in the common area.

“Speaking one day about care for the poor, about preaching in the prisons, in the workhouse, etc, he said, ‘How I want the sons of the Blessed Virgin to be known like our Lord by that mark: pauperes evangelizantur.’ (Evangelizing the poor). He laid great insistence upon this saying, ‘I love the abandoned works, hidden and secret, I love the poor.’” – *A Founder Speaks: Spiritual Talks of Jean-Claude Colin*, n.23, p. 85

These inmates may be Catholic, have a Christian background, another religion, or no religion at all. The inmates whom I meet have either asked the coordinator of the county jails to see me, have met me through the celebration of Mass, or have heard about me by word of mouth from other inmates. I bring Communion to the inmates, offer an opportunity for confession, provide scripture study on the readings for the coming Sunday, and extend an opportunity to read and discuss the Bible. Sometimes, I simply bring the opportunity for conversation as they often speak about their lives and the charges leveled against them. What is most important is to LISTEN to what they have to share.

Often, inmates wish to continue to meet with me each week, and as time passes, the relationship becomes deeper. Many of the criminal charges against them stem from an addiction of one type or another. Frequently they have burned the bridges of relationships with family and friends.

Sometimes they have never thought about a relationship with God. Often the God they believe in is not the God of Jesus but rather one they have created through the lack of proper instruction and from ideas passed down from elders. Their ideas of God approach a kind of magic rather than faith.

The inmates’ ages range from 19 to 66. There is always a group which has psychiatric problems. Some are scared. Others have lost hope. Many feel ashamed from their accusations. Some are not able to read, and others span the continuum of education from those not having finished high school to those who have a bachelor’s and even a master’s degree. Some inmates have a public defender assigned to them, others have a private attorney appointed by the court to work pro bono, and still others have a private attorney whom they pay.

The inmates span every ethnic group. The ability to speak Spanish has helped me with the few who speak only Spanish. However, there are very few who have no command of English. Many have children that they long to see. Several have waited as long as four years or more to have their case completed. Waiting for this is a frustrating daily grind for the inmates. The new Humphrey Law in California, where the bail has to be commensurate to the economic level of the individual, has been helpful. Most cannot afford the normal bail that is set. Almost all inmates need a program of one kind or another to prepare them to re-enter society. While there are programs offered for further education and recovery from addiction, waiting to get into the programs is a long ordeal. I spend some time making phone calls to lawyers, programs, and families. I spend most of my time, however, accompanying these individuals trying to let them know they are not alone, there is hope, and that this time in jail can be used in a positive way

for the future. This experience keeps me in touch with my own vulnerability and how the Spirit of God works.

I cannot fail to mention my experience of the correctional system itself. This for me is the most difficult part of the ministry. I am powerless before the system. What do I mean? There are inspections and lockdowns which come out of nowhere, meaning that I must leave the facility. Occasionally, deputies inform me that an inmate is now not available to see me. Most deputies are very good about finding a private space for me to meet with an inmate when someone else is using the regular interview room. However, there are some deputies who give me the impression that I am just one other person they’re forced to deal with. Some do understand that if I do my ministry well, the inmates will be in a better frame of mind, and therefore make the job of the deputy easier. Deputies themselves need ministry. Their job is not easy, and they receive a lot of abuse.

Why do I feel this is a Marist ministry? The Gospel of Matthew, chapter 25, is the most concrete expression of what is necessary to experience or not to experience the Kingdom about which Jesus speaks. What you do or don’t do to the least of my brothers and sisters you do or don’t do to me. The Marist Charism is meant to amplify an aspect of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. An often used expression to clarify our Charism is to be “an instrument of mercy.” As has been frequently said, mercy is the other side of the coin of justice. Many in our society consider those in our jails and prison systems to be the least in our society, and some would not consider these inmates persons deserving to be in our society. Marists walking with the inmates (the least) is very much at the heart of the Gospel. We Marists walk with inmates so they are able to experience the love and mercy of God. We are to be the instrument for these inmates to grow in belief that God is their creator, who has begun something within them which is good, and that God continues to call it forth no matter how often we (inmates and us as well) have been unresponsive and acted contrary to the call.