

Lessons from Prison Ministry

One Saturday morning about a year and a half ago I attended training to volunteer at the local county jail. During the training, the deputy instructor spent the morning teaching us everything that can go wrong in a prison. Riots, lock downs, power outages, disease outbreak, homemade weapons - it really [^]is quite an impressive spectrum. Her goal was to help us become well-informed volunteers, and though I appreciated her help, I also started feeling terrified, wondering if I made a huge mistake.

Early Apprehension: Before that morning, I had never been inside a prison, let alone inside a prison cell. On a tour of the women's floor, I quickly walked in and out of a tiny, empty compartment with two cots, a sink and a toilet. It was about the size of the foyer in my apartment, and there was one sliver of a window. On the floor, inmates walked around, played cards, talked, and didn't really pay much attention to us. Even more bizarre was visiting the high security floor, with its darkened tower and absolute silence, the inmates closed in their cells at all times. Some of them are violent criminals; some simply can't be with the general inmate population because of who they are. I couldn't help but cry for a moment, there at the end of the day, for all the suffering compacted in that building. There are so many ways that humans hurt each other, and it is disturbing to be so close to so much of it in one moment.

Despite this beginning, I have grown to love working with inmates. I began prison ministry with a sense of us vs. them; regular people vs. inmates. While understanding fully the place and necessity of the justice system, I was compelled to see the inmates as humans above all else. During his papacy, Pope Francis has emphasized the need to seek out the poor, marginalized, and forgotten- to try always to see the face of Christ in others. There is no better boot camp for this attitude than meeting face to face with inmates.

How it Works: The format of our ministry is simple: on alternating weeks we hold a Mass or a liturgical service. That means studying the readings from the previous Sunday and having discussion, mediation, and prayer with the inmates. Both male and female are welcome in our program, and during discussion time we sit in a circle, men on one side, women on the other.

Our meeting is in the prison's "multipurpose room." It is a gray cinder block room with tables, plastic chairs, and fluorescent lights, though we set up an altar on the table with candles (never lit) and religious images to brighten up the space.

Before getting there, one must go through a series of checks, including a metal detector and three different badge checkpoints. There are many things one cannot have in that space, or anywhere in the prison, including staples and spring-loaded writing pens. The inmates in our program are those on good behavior or lower-level offenders, and a deputy is always stationed outside, watching and listening on the CCTV. We never ask the inmates the nature of their crimes, and it is rare they will speak of them in detail, but I have never once heard an inmate insist on his or her innocence. To the contrary, they are painfully aware they are where they need to be.

Even when a priest is there to offer Mass the format is relaxed, and he encourages the inmates to share their perspective on the readings after his homily. We have discussed forgiveness and mercy, abandonment, how to maintain faith in the most difficult of circumstances, how to notice when God is calling us, how to maintain mindfulness, how to let go of the past. Often an inmate's insight into a particular reading shows me something I missed, and we on the volunteer side are always learning.

But for the Grace of God: Immersed in this environment week after week, I slowly felt my perspective change. It was admittedly difficult in the beginning not to think, "I'm in prison! I'm in a jail! I'm talking to an inmate!" But as the weeks passed, I saw that the inmates were not so "other" as I thought.

From this experience, I have learned a few important realities, the first being that anyone, truly, could be in prison. Before I began this work another member told me, "But for the grace of God, any of us could be behind bars," and I thought, that's a silly thing to say. Later I realized it means that, given a different set of circumstances, life decisions, and environmental factors, yes, any one of us could end up in prison. All of life is a series of choices, one after another, and the consequences of certain choices can be devastating. This is a lesson often learned the hard way, once it's too late.

Meeting with the inmates has also taught me a greater appreciation for the miracle which is the Mass. I had never been to Mass outside of church, even outdoors, and certainly not inside a prison, before this experience. This was a great revelation: the Mass is the Mass, no matter where it is celebrated. Father Peck has a handy little kit that contains the wine and bread, and he puts on his vestments as we organize chairs and set hymnals out for each person. Suddenly the room is not just a meeting place, but a holy place, a place where Jesus Himself is physically present.

Prison ministry has also helped me cultivate gratitude. The reality of these inmates' situation, even when they are optimistic, is never too far off. There is nothing jolly about their lives, although they try to bring their best attitude to our meetings. If ever during our time together I feel I am simply having a _nice conversation with another person interested in God, re-focusing on the identical jumpsuits snaps me back to reality.

A Beautiful Ministry: At the end of the Mass or liturgical service, everyone has an opportunity to pray aloud for special intentions. We pray for obvious things like the other inmates and our families; more often than not one of the inmates will pray for us, the volunteers. I considered this one evening: all prayer has value, but is there some special grace that comes from prayer offered up in suffering? I have perhaps the child-like tendency to view prayer like a booster shot; an extra touch of goodness and energy you receive when someone prays for you. How much more so if the one praying is in a particular place of suffering?

Ultimately what I have encountered in this ministry are inmates hopeful and searching for answers, willing to admit they have refused God's will. As I recognize pieces of myself and others I know in them, I realize there may be less of a divide between us than I thought. The experience has taught me deeper gratitude for what I have and an appreciation for the universality of the Mass and the faith, which strengthens my understanding of the power of the sacraments and the truth that, "Where two or more are gathered together in my name, there am I with them" (Matthew 18:20). I keep them all in my prayers and, knowing they do the same for me, feel that much closer to God.