

Prison Ministry Formation Talk
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At the recent Chapter General meeting, Pope Francis expressed his closeness to the Order of Malta. He sent a letter which was read at the opening session, where the Pope thanked the Order of Malta and praised our many hands-on outreach ministries, and noted *"you do this by example by treating the sick and visiting prisoners."*

He also highlighted the importance of being faithful disciples and fervent witnesses to the faith, and notes that *"this naturally requires **continuous formation**" for all members of the Order of Malta.*

I love his choice of words, "**continuous formation**," because it so aptly describes our state in our spiritual journey through the Order.

You see many of us here today with crosses in our lapel. These crosses are not badges of honor for past deeds done for the Church, but rather, an outward sign that we have made a commitment to live a certain way. That commitment includes our living in a state of **constant formation**, which brings me to prison ministry.

Your presence here this weekend reflects that you are already on this journey of formation. You have probably been exposed to our works in caring for the sick and the poor, but there is a good chance you have not been exposed to prison ministry.

My experience is that there are many who feel some reluctance in serving this community. I understand that completely because I once was firm in my resolve not to participate in prison ministry.

At the time I had a busy law practice, my kids were still at home, and I felt like I had a limited amount of time and that there were people more deserving of my time than prisoners.

In hindsight I am horrified by my attitude. I looked at the service to others as a scored event where some were worthy and others less so. Even worse was this attitude that those in prison did not deserve my time- they did not deserve me. What a false sense of moral superiority and self-righteousness! Shame on me. Shame on me.

My journey off this path was not particularly noble, either. It was about 2013 and I had been in the Order for a couple of years. I loved the members, our masses and spiritual activities and was active in all of our works.

I had this growing sense that obedience is an important part of our Order and I was wondering, "Obedient to whom," and what would obedience look like. I decided that if I was simply saying, "Yes," to the things I enjoyed doing, there was not much obedience in that. I had to go do the one thing I vowed not to do, and that was to go into prisons.

If you want to get into prison, the easy way is to jack a car; the hard way is to try to volunteer. After some searching, I found something I could do with the least amount of commitment possible, which is to say, no commitment at all. I began going to graduation ceremonies for Bridges to Life restorative justice programs.

The first couple of times going into prison units was intimidating. You arrive at a gate and you hear the first of many buzzes, gates opening, heavy steel doors clanging shut, more buzzes, and more clanging as you move from compartment to compartment. White florescent lights are constantly blasting down at you. I kept thinking, "I hope they don't forget me here."

My third graduation ceremony was at a woman's prison unit. There is always a point where some of the graduates can give their testimony. As this woman told her story it was immediately clear she was very intelligent and well-spoken. She had a high degree of self-awareness and was able to beautifully express what was happening to her, emotionally and spiritually, as she went through this program.

She told how she was able to forgive herself and that she was reconnected with her daughter, who had cut off all ties with her. Her story was compelling and everyone in the room had tears welling up in their eyes. Then she said, "*I killed five people.*" The room got very quiet. She had an alcohol abuse problem and she killed five innocent people while driving drunk.

When I left the prison, I knew that this was for me.

I started going to retreats in prison in 2016. I try to go to the unit I visit at least twice a month when I am in Houston. These men in white have become one of my important faith communities.

As you chart your spiritual journey within the Order, I encourage all of you to begin to develop encounters with those in prison.

First, start with prayer. In this way, prison ministry is open to all members. Make a conscious decision to include prison ministry in your daily prayers. Pray for those in prison, pray for their families, pray for victims, pray for their families, pray for those on death row, pray for those whose job it is to execute people... you get the picture. Your whole outlook changes once you begin to pray for someone.

Next, consider being a pen pal. It's safe and you can do it at your own convenience. They will never know your full name or address. You write once a month. In an ideal world, you would write your

pal, they would reply, you would respond to their reply and a nice volley would ensue. That almost never happens.

Instead, you write them and you have to continue writing them. You may not hear from them for a long while. I had a pal where I received my first reply after four years of writing. Be persistent. You will wonder if your letters are received, or if they are with any effect. It is an empty feeling, but I assure you your letters have effect. Have faith and persist.

If you get a pal that is responsive, your encounter with someone in prison will deepen as you learn more about the curious world inside a prison.

At some point I encourage you to actually go inside a prison and go eyeball to eyeball with a prisoner. There are fantastic Kolbe retreats, which are Catholic. There are also numerous ecumenical retreats and other ways to get inside.

Many of you have already been to Lourdes. You know what it is like when little groups gather around the blue carts and you share stories of your families and maybe at some point a malade or companion feels safe enough to open up and tell you what they are afraid of, or what their dreams are. Prison is the same way. If you reach the point where, in the bravado culture of a prison, someone tells you what they are afraid of, you know you have had an important encounter.

There is a saying that, *"If you want to launch big ships you have to go where the water is deep."* In our faith, the deep water is in prison.

I want to close by sharing a beautiful prayer we say in our Kairos retreats. It is especially fitting in this season as we are approaching Easter. It is called,

Prayer to Christ, the Prisoner

Lord, because you wanted to save the world, you decided for the following things to happen:

You became a man

You were born a human

You were circumcised

You were rejected by your neighbors

You were betrayed by a close friend, a traitor

You were cuffed, and shackled, and led stumbling to court

You were forced to stand in front of judges and prosecutors, with no attorneys to help you

You were accused by lying, paid witnesses

You were tortured with beatings, insults, and whippings

You had men spit in your face

You had sharp thorns shoved into your scalp

You were punched in the face, and sticks beat your body and head

You were not allowed any medical treatment

You were blindfolded and had all of your clothes stripped off your body and forced to carry the thing on which you were to be killed, almost half a mile

You were nailed through your hands and feet to a heavy piece of wood

You hung on the cross, between two criminals, in front of the whole city, and your family and your friends

You were offered bitter wine to drink, had a spear shoved into your side and left to die with no appeal.

Lord, you willingly allowed these things to happen, to save the world, and to save me. When I think of these things that happened to you, your sufferings, I ask that you bring me to the same paradise that you brought the thief who was killed with

*you. All he asked of you was to be forgiven. This I seek also.
Amen.*

Congratulations to all of you for being here this Formation Weekend. I hope you will join me as we answer the call to visit those in prison.