

LIVING OUR DMJ CHARISM WITH THOSE WHO HAD LOST HOPE

For the past two years, I have been blessed to volunteer once a week at the Francisco Homes - Downtown Los Angeles where Sr. Teresa Groth is the Managing Director of Transitional Houses for ex-prisoners. This is a facility that welcomes men newly released from prison. Francisco Homes offers these men the possibility of being re-integrated into society. I am also blessed to have Srs. Linda Peters and Nuala Briody who give me weekly rides since they too volunteer there.

My interaction with the Francisco Homes community has been a blessing. It has given me another chance to exercise my Daughters of Mary and Joseph Community Charism: Instruments of Mercy and Compassion in God's Hand. I have been able to interact with some of the men who have just come out of prison, those who have been out for a while and those who are already off parole. It is an experience of joy, hope and gratitude to God. For the men on parole, it is a blessing to share in the joy of seeing the sun again, walking the beach, doing some gardening, walking the streets unaccompanied, sitting and eating in a restaurant or walking to a store and buying what they need. Some have jobs and can earn some money to help them plan for the future. Wonderful!

According to my new friends, prison is a dark, hopeless place. Prisoners often live their lives without friends, without family, staring at the prison bars and feeling guilt and anger burning in their hearts. They live their lives wondering what is next. Some are sure they will never come out of prison. Their hopes are shattered more especially when they go to the Parole Board hearing and they are denied release. Most of them have spent 20 – 40 years in prison. A good number of them went to prison in their teens. As God always surprises us, they are one day surprised to know that they would be released and another day they find themselves either on a bus or a train heading to the transitional houses like the one where I volunteer!

Full of hope, these guys embrace the challenges of technology; making phone calls, texting, emailing, googling for jobs and availability of housing! The world has moved on for some of them! To some, hopes of finding ready jobs are shattered, to others the world is unfolding at a snail's pace, while to others, life could not be better than it is today at Francisco homes. Way to live again! Great attitude!

With them, we share their life stories before, during and after incarceration regarding their re-entry into community. Their experiences are sometimes hard to take in, kind of painful I but full of hope. Sometimes it is hard to think of how difficult it can be to keep faith with all the suffering that they had to go through. Some of the families these men come from do not even want to hear about them. They wish they had died in prison, some are warmly welcomed home; some find that members of their immediate family are all dead. Each of them has a different story to tell. As I share in their moments, I have come to learn a lot from them. Much as they think I am helping them, they do not know that they too are helping me to live our charism.

As an Instrument of Mercy and Compassion, I am challenged to listen without judgment, without having to offer solutions or answers. It is a great way to be with my friends. Maybe all they need from me is just a greeting and that is enough! Maybe it is a listening ear or a presence! It is interesting that even those who pass by me without a word, ask the next time I come around why I did not visit the week before! Interesting!

The other take-away from my experience is that in dialogue, there is listening without judgment, assumptions or stereotype; there is listening for understanding rather than debate or even agreement; there is an atmosphere of safety and mutual respect. May be I am re-learning how to be a compassionate presence.



I have learnt that other people can be a door to God's presence as sure as prayer can be a doorway for us to speak to Jesus Christ. Sometimes Christ's Spirit will enter despite our locked doors, but more often Jesus waits for us to open the door and let him in. We can provide hospitality for the encounter waiting at our own doorways to receive the other, or we can keep that door resolutely closed out of fear. How can one be happy with these men that were incarcerated because they killed someone? Think about that? These might be actual murderers, but myself, can I resonate with them in any way? Of course yes. What about you? Think about it. This makes me think of the fact that one reaction to the presence of the other is to form an opposing party called "us" and name the other "them." Once in a while I meet neighbours who see me entering these houses and come out to warn me that those houses are for ex-prisoners. In other words, be careful they are not like us, something is wrong with them. True indeed but this kind of advice if not thought through can allow us to control our fears and develop assumptions about the differences between us and them. These

assumptions may or may not be true but they form an effective barrier of defense. But our fear can also try to re-make the other in our own image with a lens of sameness that blinds us to differences and refuses to see the possibilities of change that might come to us from acknowledging the other. In both cases dialogue and mutual listening become impossible because our minds are made up, it is easy to label and stereotype. And it is just this commitment to listen and dialogue with the other that makes us available to one another and to God.

All in all, I am learning: acceptance, letting go, hospitality, trusting in God, forgiveness, tolerance, simplicity, peace, justice, compassion, and mercy from my new friends. Each Wednesday I visit with them, I hear about how all these Gospel values are lived. This gives me a new look at life and a willingness to change. Shall I call it metanoia? It is life changing. Out of Africa to a new ministry that does not exist in my home country, here I am as a social worker interacting with African American, Asians, Hispanics, Caucasians and Arabs – a real taste of internationality. Maybe I should have started with this ministry in order to learn to be an Instrument of Mercy! Not yet too late though I have to remind myself that I am over 50 but, I live one day at a time and I think that to do any good act, it is never too late. I brace myself with the light of Christ to go on with my volunteer work there which involves listening to their stories so as to be a spiritual, emotional and social support. Other than being a listening ear to the men, my attentive compassionate listening helps the Case Manager of Francisco Homes to know what the needs of the residents are. That is another way in which my visits are of help.

May God continue to make us available for those to whom society says “there is no place for you here”.

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