

The Prison Environment

Prisons are not good places in which to live. Most people in prison, if they had a choice, would never choose to live in prison. Not only are they bad neighborhoods filled with troubled and troublesome inmates; but the inmates cannot choose who they must live with in very small and crowded places, especially when they must share cells with other people.

Some of the people who they share quarters with are good people who are friendly, kind, and easy to get along with. Lasting friendships are made in prison.

However, some of the people who an inmate will be called upon to live with are selfish, dishonest, unfriendly and even dangerous. Prisoners who spend many years in prison will experience having to live in close quarters with this type of prisoner, at some time during their incarceration.

A prisoner (incarcerated for DUI) once was asking people to pray for him to be moved to another cell. He said that he was living in fear, sleeping with one eye open; because he had to occupy a small cell with a man who had been transferred from another prison, after he had killed his cellmate. He said his new cellmate was a gangster filled with hate; a thief with filthy habits and very dangerous.

When a husband or wife, child, mother or father, grandfather or grandmother, or someone very dear to a prisoner dies, that inmate, in most cases, cannot attend the funeral. In a few cases, inmates with only a month or two to serve before release from prison are given furloughs to attend the funerals of deceased family members. All a person involved in prison ministry can do to comfort the prisoner in these situations is to pray with him, for him, and for the one who died. Following are some prayers which can be copied and given to a prisoner during these difficult times:

A Prayer for Our Beloved Dead

We give them back to you, O Lord,
who first gave them to us,
and as you did not lose them in the giving
so we do not lose them in the return.
Not as the world gives do you give,
O Lover of souls!
For what is yours is ours also,
if we belong to you.
Life is unending because love is undying,
and the boundaries of this mortal life
are but an horizon,

and an horizon is but the limit of our sight.
Lift us up, strong Son of God, that
we may see further!
Strengthen us in faith, that we may see
beyond the horizon!
And while you prepare a place for us,
as you have promised,
prepare us also for that happy place,
that where you are we may be also,
with those who we have loved, forever.
By Fr. Bede Jarrett, O.P.

What is Death?

A wondrous mercy-
A coming home-
A divine welcome-
to a well loved child.

St. Martin De Porres

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
In verdant pastures He gives me repose;
Beside restful waters He leads me;
He refreshes my soul.
He guides me in right paths
for His name's sake.
Even though I walk in the dark valley
I fear no evil; for You are on my side
With Your rod and Your staff that
give me courage.
You spread the table before me
In the sight of my foes;
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Only goodness and kindness follow me
all the days of my life;
And I shall dwell in the house of the
Lord forever.

Some prisoners have complained that they never could relax in their cells, because their cellmate was an active homosexual.

There is also a lot of tension in prison life; because prisoners are aware of other prisoners closely observing them; looking for ways to take advantage of them. They live under stressful circumstances, and this takes its toll on them mentally and physically.

Not to be ignored are the strip searches which occur frequently in maximum-security prisons. These searches not only limit the ability of prisoners to conceal weapons or other contraband; but they keep reminding the prisoner that he is powerless, and must obey authority as long as he is in prison.

In the hostile prison environment, the prisoner feels friendless and lonely. If he never prayed before, he will pray in prison. As soldiers would say, "There are no atheists in foxholes." **To overcome the loneliness**, prisoners will search the Scriptures.

"For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol. I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am like those who have no help, like those forsaken among the dead, like the slain that lie in a grave, like those whom you remember no more, for they are cut off from your hand. You have put me in the depths of the pit in the regions dark and deep. Your wrath lies heavy upon me, and you overwhelm me with all your waves. You have caused my companions to shun me; you have made me a thing of horror to them. I am shut in so that I cannot escape; my eye grows dim through sorrow. Everyday I call on you, O Lord; I spread out my hands to you." (Psalm 88:3-9)

Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord; and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old. Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness sake, O Lord!" (Psalm 25:6-7)

"The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us." (Psalm 103:8-12)

When suffering of any kind brings us down, we look to God for mercy. We can be confident that we will receive his mercy if we are merciful to others.

"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'" (Matthew 25:37-40)

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy."(Matthew 5:7)

To enjoy any measure of peace, a prisoner must overcome feelings of anger, hatred, fear and self-pity.

No prisoner will successfully overcome these feelings with violent action in word or deed toward others. Nor will he find more than temporary comfort or relief from these feelings from pleasure in food, in drink, in any sexual activity, or in drugs, tobacco or alcohol. Any and all of these worldly solutions, when followed, will only intensify and magnify the bad feelings a prisoner wants to overcome and produce more frustration, sadness and feelings of hopelessness.

Only living in the wisdom of God, revealed to us in Jesus Christ, produces the deep-rooted, undefeatable joy, peace and contentment that every human being yearns for, with all his heart.

Anger

"Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil."(Ephesians 4:26-27)

"A fool gives full vent to anger, but the wise quietly holds it back." (Proverbs 29:11)

"Anger and wrath, these also are abominations, yet a sinner holds onto them."(Sirach 27:30)

"Jealousy and anger shorten life, and anxiety brings on premature old-age." (Sirach 30:24)

Hatred

"Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers and sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God who they have not seen." (1 John 4: 20)

"Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets." (Luke 6: 22 - 23)

"Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor." (Romans 12: 9-10)

Fear

"There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love." (1 John 4:18)

"I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!" (Luke 12:4-5)

"Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord." (1 Peter 3:13-15)

"Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for 10 days you'll have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life." (Revelation 2:9-10)

The Victory of Love-The Triumph of the Cross

Our God knows what we are going through when we are brought low by suffering of any kind. In other words, in Jesus, God is seen to be capable of compassion for us when we suffer; because he has suffered far more in every way than we will ever be called upon to suffer. He knows what we are going through in prison, in nursing homes, and in psychiatric wards.

During his trials, he never hates or even shows anger. He gains the victory of love by showing only merciful love and forgiveness to everyone, while his ability to love is being tested by a heavier cross of suffering than any of us will ever be called upon to bear. We are called to be most successful in life by living in his love, and relishing victory over all adversity in his way.

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, for the words of my groaning? Oh my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest. But I am a worm, and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people. I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast; my mouth has dried up like potsherd; and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death. For dogs are all around me; a company of evildoers encircles me." (Psalm 22:1-2, 6, 14-16)