

## **Standing with Prisoners A Time to Heal**

Our role as Church is to give witness to God's love for all peoples. But God's incarcerated children? I believe so. This can be a very enriching ministry. One can see the work of the Lord and be strengthened by it. It is one of the gifts that people usually don't expect when stepping foot into the jail. I am there to witness to the power and love of a God who lives among us. There is probably no place on earth where more people are searching for the presence of God in their lives. Certainly, I can think of no other place where there are so many Bibles, so many trying to experience God. The jail can be a very spiritual place.

But I also hear the question that has been put to me so many times, "What about the victim?" And yet, the person sitting for years in jail, innocent under law, is also very much the victim. But, understanding that, raising the question, "what about the victim?" is a valid concern. As a Church, we need to reach out to all who suffer. As a Church we need to try to give witness to God's power to heal, God's willingness to heal. As a member of a religious community dedicated to the Precious Blood, I believe in the power of the blood to heal. I believe in the power of Christ-victim. I believe that Christ, being the ultimate victim, can heal the pain of one who has suffered. I believe, too, that the blood of Christ, given for our offenses, offers forgiveness to the one who asks. That stands radically in the face of our criminal justice system.

I have always thought reconciliation involved bringing the two together: the victim and the one who has caused the suffering. But in a jail setting, this goes against the grain of things. In the courts as well as in the jail, there is little concern for healing. For the most part it is physically and legally impossible to bring the victim together with the one accused outside the battle lines of the courtroom. It is obvious that often times there is more than one victim. The vast majority of those incarcerated in our jails are themselves victims of violence. There is also the reality of being victimized by the criminal justice system. It is a difficult thing to see the clear lines between victim and the accused. It can be very tempting, in light of the injustice of a system that overlooks the dignity of a person, to disregard the very existence of another victim. But, of course, it would be dishonest to do so. Certainly honesty is a prerequisite if ever there is to be healing. Part of that honesty is recognizing my pain, in this case the pain of the incarcerated, but also recognizing the pain of the victim. In both cases it is not something that happens overnight. There are times when sorrow is immediate --realizing the pain caused to another. But there are times, too, when the accused needs to first come to terms with all that is happening to him or her.

We never enter into the jail setting demanding remorse for the crime committed, as though it were just some ritual to be performed. But it is something for which we have to allow. We have to say by our presence that it is okay to have remorse. We have to reflect a God so loving and forgiving that true sorrow is okay, that it doesn't make me less of a person. In a situation such as a jail, often times the minister is the only one who is there for no other reason but to be there.

The names of those who have been victims to the crime in the streets flow from my lips like a litany. So, too, do the names of those who are suffering from years and years of incarceration. In the midst of all this, where does the Church stand? What is my role as a minister in the jail? What is my role as a Christian? Is reconciliation something that is possible when there seems to be, at times, only victims? Can reconciliation even happen when the one responsible for the suffering either does not or cannot express the sorrow at having caused the pain? What if the victim, as is the case so many times, never hears the words, "I'm sorry?" Can reconciliation happen? Can Christ-victim offer the forgiveness necessary for reconciliation? Can Christ, who forgave as he hung on

that cross, be the victim who offers us forgiveness even before we ask? Can the blood of Christ spilled on the cross bring forth that kind of healing?

I remember sitting in the courtroom when Leo, the young man accused of stabbing Alfonso, was finally brought before the judge. I couldn't help but look at Leo sitting there next to his lawyer. He had on a white shirt, obviously bought for him for this occasion. Alfonso, too, had on a borrowed white shirt. The two looked remarkably alike. They were both 19 years old. Then I looked over at the father of Leo as he sat in the courtroom. His eyes reflected a father's concern for his son. I was in court for Alfonso. I was there to be a support to him. He had almost died and I couldn't forget that. It wouldn't be fair to somehow set aside the pain of a young man who will continue to bear the scars --physically and emotionally.

But as I sat in that courtroom, I couldn't help but to feel like this had nothing to do with the two young men sitting there. It had nothing to do with me or the father of Leo. It had everything to do with the court proceedings.

I couldn't bring myself to want prison for this kid. The more I sat there, the more uncomfortable I felt. I felt uncomfortable, too, because I wasn't upset enough or bitter enough or seeking revenge enough. I didn't feel that I was totally there for Alfonso. I almost felt like I had betrayed the violence that had happened to him. I was his family. I was the one who should be seeking justice --revenge. I felt like I was in a very evil place. That courtroom wasn't about healing or reconciliation, it was about continuing the crime.

I can't tell you how many times when I have walked in protest or stood in vigil against the death penalty or some other issue, that someone angrily has come up to me and said, "What about the victim? Don't you care at all about the victim?" Of course I do, but you can't explain it to them. They really don't want to hear it. Like sitting in that courtroom, I can't participate in the evil. Evil has never been conquered by evil. I have been to death row. There is life there. There are people there who have families and feelings and their pain is real. As a Christian, I can't ignore that. When we have a choice between life and death, a Christian has to choose life.

I have been privileged and blessed to have witnessed a God who very much lives among the people. I have seen the healing that comes in recognizing a God who knows suffering and pain and hurt. I have seen the hope that our faith, a faith rooted in forgiveness and love, can offer one who has many reasons to despair. I have witnessed liberation in the midst of incarceration.

Today, more and more, as members of a community that carries the name of the Precious Blood, we are called to be people of healing and reconciliation. As Christians, we can't really get around the call to live among those who are suffering from every form of violence. We must align ourselves with the poor and suffering.

*(Fr. David Kelly, C.P.P.S., "A Time to Heal," The Wine Cellar, October 1994, pp. 27-38)*