

I was in prison and you visited me. Matthew 25:36

VOICES FROM PRISON

A NEWSLETTER FROM ADEODATUS PRISON MINISTRY

Autumn 2010, Vol. 3, No.3

I keep bleeding, I keep, keep bleeding love. Leona Lewis

I didn't know I was obsessed until it stopped. (Anthony) There are tears in the eyes of this 41 year old guy who sees through nonsense with his blue eyes and describes himself as not very religious “until I took a knee at a church in South Philly and then kept doing so at daily mass,” he tells me. “I substituted one ritual for another, Father,” Anthony explains in his offhanded way. “See, I used to shoot myself up with heroin every morning for fifteen years.” He holds open his arms to show me the dark spots from his punctured veins.

Serving as a Catholic chaplain in the Philadelphia Prison with its 8000 plus inmates, I hear a lot of ‘confessions.’ It is humbling to hear these men and women tumble out their sins as I sit across from them at a metal table in the cellblock. Holding their hands, I pray with them. At the same time I am struck at how their stories need to be heard by others. The wrongdoings yes, but about the dysfunctional families they grew up in also. The lack of fathering/mothering. The poverty. The lostness and sense of unworthiness. About how they are being found as well, in of all places--a prison! These are God’s daughters and sons too, and they are being found by the Good Shepherd. *If them, why not us?*

Anthony is loveable in his vulnerability as he wipes a tear off his cheek with the side of his fist. Anthony, now graced by God to change. I listen to his story for a half hour. I try to stop him a few times because I want to eat lunch before I celebrate a mass at the other prison. Anthony can’t stop himself, and his heroin-bruised mind goes back and forth in the time sequence. I have to focus him occasionally, “So what happened when you were arrested last New Year’s day?” “Oh yeah,” the handsome but haggard face looks at me, both of us sprawled in folding chairs in a corner of the inmate dining room, bare now but with other inmates beginning to set tables and chairs up for lunch.

Anthony then proceeds to tell me of the salvation moment a year ago that he had originally started to tell me about with such emotion. “In the back of that paddy wagon, all by myself, I felt old...I’m only 40...well 41 now...but I felt a hundred years old. I felt old. And tired...and alone. I never felt so bad in my life. Not being very religious, I didn’t even know who I was praying to when I called out, ‘God, stop it, please...stop me!!!’ I wanted God to either take my life or take the drug addiction away.” He pauses. The blue eyes fill up. He looks away. “I didn’t realize it then...” Anthony starts another tangent.

“When I was locked up that New Year’s Day, my godfather bailed me out for \$800. I got off the phone after telling my childrens’ mother where to pick up the bail money. I felt great. I was gonna get out of jail instead of spending 3-4 months



behind bars. Another junkie who saw me so happy knew that I was getting out. He came over to me and said, "Where are ya gonna cop some dope when you are out?" Anthony glances at me. I try and imagine his children, his 'children's mother,' his godfather--and how his drug-driven life keeps theirs in turmoil. "I wasn't even thinking about getting high," he continues. It was a shock to realize that. I have changed out of prison clothes to street clothes thirty times in my life, and this was the first time I was getting ready to leave the prison without the need to get drugs as soon as I could. The obsession—now I could see that I had one...they talk about it all the time in AA meetings—*was gone!* I thank God for this now."

I didn't know where to put all this, the 'magic' of it coming from a single prayer. But I could see by Anthony's face, relaxing and smiling, *trusting* me with his spiritual experience, that this was profound. Eventually, he led me back to the paddy wagon as his pivotal moment. Like a demon being cast out, the "obsession" left him when he *named* it, and prayed to God to "take it away" in an almost suicidal desperation.

He first realized that God answered his prayer when he experienced the peace in his heart--without the obsessive thought of drugs--as he was getting ready to leave the prison. The 'taking the knee' ritual of daily Mass, which he stumbled into after he got out, replaced the ritual of shooting himself up with dope each morning. Anthony experienced nine months of sobriety while out on bail, filled with growth and change. Then he was sentenced to 11 and 1/2 - 23 months and will be released soon. The real test will come then. Will his "obsession" come back in a vengeance unless he works the 12 steps as well as attending daily Mass? Our "support group" (see website below for details) has learned the twin necessities of these the hard way.

As well as inviting you to empathize with those in prison, this newsletter hopes to inspire its readers to notice how God is working in their own lives and to thank God for this. St. Augustine wrote his Confessions with this in mind: *Who is like unto Thee, O Lord? Thou hast broken my bonds. I will sacrifice to Thee the sacrifice of praise. How Thou hast broken them I shall tell and all who adore Thee will say as they listen: "Blessed be the Lord in heaven and earth, great and wonderful is his name."* Confessions, Bk 8, 1. Fr. Paul Morrissey, O.S.A.

A BRIEF REFLECTION

1. What stirs in you when you hear Anthony's story?
2. Have you ever prayed from your gut like him?
3. Do you or your friends have any "obsessions?"
4. Is a 12-step 'ritual' as important as prayer for anyone with an addiction?
5. What do you thank God for?

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

We distribute to 12 parishes. Any donation would greatly help this mission.

ADEODATUS PRISON MINISTRY

P.O. Box 40815, Phila., Pa 19107

www.spirhealth.com

Father Paul Morrissey O.S.A., George Munyan, co-editors