

I was in prison and you came to visit me
Setting the captives free
By Bishop Victor Galeone

Dear Friends in the Lord,

Two months after his election, Pope John XXIII paid a surprise visit to Rome's Regina Coeli prison. During his encounter with the inmates, he informed them that he could relate to their plight, as he recalled the devastation his own family experienced when an uncle of his had been jailed years before. In relating the story the next day, the official Vatican newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano, blandly reported that the Holy Father had mentioned that a relative of his had once been incarcerated.

As a seminarian in Rome at the time, I wondered why the editors of L'Osservatore wanted to obscure the relationship of the jailed uncle. Were they fearful that the public would be shocked to learn that an uncle of the Holy Father had a prison record? Didn't they realize that Jesus had been arrested too? As well as the apostles Peter, James and John? And that St. Paul had been imprisoned for at least four years?

During Lent we recall how Jesus came to set the captives free. Obviously, he came to break the shackles that bind all us sinners to our destructive behaviors. But he also came to relate those who literally find themselves behind prison bars. Some of you may be tempted to frown on those who are incarcerated: "They're getting their just desserts!" I wish that those with that mindset could experience just one of the following instances.

The twice a month visits of my predecessor, Bishop John Snyder, as he goes to bring comfort and encouragement to the death row inmates at Florida State Prison and to those in solitary confinement at Union Correctional Institution.

The death watches that Dale Recinella has conducted during his four years as the death row chaplain in Florida. After his most recent deathwatch, Dale's description of the family's final farewell to their son-brother-husband-father would melt a heart of stone.

The marvelous testimonies given by former inmates at the annual Prisoners for Christ Breakfast that is hosted in Jacksonville. To hear these former hardened convicts abashedly share how they came to know the Lord while in prison, and how they now want to help other inmates experience the same joy they found is a marvel to behold.

The testimony from any one of the inmates that has participated in a life-changing Kairos or Dismas retreat, conducted by Father Bob McDermott in our correctional institutions.

The tears of joy running down an inmate's face as he received Jesus for the first time in Holy Communion, accompanied by his Catholic comrades. I had just received him into the church on my annual visit to Baker Correctional Institution last December.

The letter of thanks that I received from another inmate at BCI shortly after Christmas, in which he wrote: "I'm due to get out of prison on March 4, 2006...I've surrendered my life over to Christ and have asked him to show me the way. I want to minister to young adults that are having problems, and try to lead them on the right path. Prison is absolutely no place to be. This is not what God has planned for us..."

You may be wondering, "What's the point of all this? How can I help?" First, you can pray for those who are imprisoned and for all those who minister to them. If you want to do more, perhaps you could become a pen pal of one of the inmates. To do so, you should contact Sister Dorothea Murphy, director

of Advocacy for our inmates. In my opinion, Sister Dorothea Murphy is one of the unsung heroines of our diocese. Whenever I have been privileged to accompany her in a prison visit, I have witnessed her love for the inmates, and the deep respect that both the warden and the guards have for her. So if you want to investigate how you might become a pen pal, please write to: Sister of Mercy Dorothea Murphy, Justice and Reconciliation Ministry, 1717 NE 9 th St., Suite 123, Gainesville, FL 32609-3719. Or you may email her justice@gru.net

The Lord has deep compassion for those who find themselves in prison - so much so that he identifies himself with them. How rewarding it will be, when he calls us from this life, to hear the following welcome from his lips! "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, and inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world...For I was in prison and you came to visit me."