

THE JOY OF BEING LED TO JAIL

My story of the Jail Ministry of St Francis of Assisi Catholic Church, Marshalltown, Iowa, by Deacon Gary Pusillo.

“THE CHURCH OF THE SANDALS”

FOUNDATION OF FAITH

Growing up, I was taught the Catholic alphabet and language while I was learning English. The Catholic alphabet and language gave me a sense of belonging, a connection to thousands of years of amazing stories from the Catholic Sacraments, Mass, and traditions. When I was in Deaconate formation, our professors expected specific language, but the “Holy Spirit” was demanding that I learn a new pronunciation and application. I quickly learned that not everyone spoke Catholic or knew anything about our alphabet. This learning experience has lasted me a lifetime.



During my 5 years of Deacon formation classes, we were constantly evaluated at many scheduled “inquisitions” where the psychologists, professors, priests, senior deacons, and others would judge our performance and mental capacity to continue in the class. One time they confronted me because I was questioning so many things during classes.

One person said:” We figured it out that you only want to become a deacon to start your own church. I said yes and it will be called the “Church of the Sandals” because everyone that wants to belong has to wear sandals.” They looked at me as if I was drinking all the communion wine.

ONE BODY, MANY PARTS

Many denominations and religions were going into the jail and prisons, but they often left behind people that were confused, distracted, unimportant, condemned, rejected, and turned off about God. No one was speaking their language. Joy and hope were not cultivated, but only reserved for those that spoke the same language of their particular religious group. In jail and prisons, I found the Catholic alphabet and language needed to be translated to change minds and transform hearts. I wanted to guard against the attitudes that only promoted judgmental attitudes between other jail and prison ministries, rather than producing hope and freedom to those who were incarcerated.

In a familiar Gospel Reading we hear Jesus Call to Simon who is called Peter and his brother Andrew “Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Does God expect to encounter us in some sacred place, or does God just find us? God is a seeker. God makes the first call, and we respond --- often after we have received a divinely constant outpouring of mercy, forgiveness, compassion, and love.

FOOD AND FAITH

It was about -20F as I was walking around taking samples of a herd of horses running in a group of about 1500 head. It was without a doubt the furthest I have even been from any town, village, or settlement in my entire life; I was in outer Mongolia, close to the Russian boarder. After about 4 hours, I had had it with the cold, wind and the horse’s attitude and I really

wanted someplace to go where it was warm. My colleague; a Mongolian; said it was time to go to the Ger and get some food and warm up. A ger is a large round tent like structure surrounded by felt walls and a canvas roof. Bending low to enter, the inside was bright with colors of all sorts of hand-woven cloth on the walls and brightly painted chests used to hold belongings. The fire was from a small stove in the center of the room. Lunch was simmering in a strange looking pot on the top of the stove.

Many happy greetings were made to me, and I was immediately handed a bowl of something, that was so hot I had to put my gloves back on to hold it. **The liquid smelt like a warm wet sheep**, and not surprisingly it was a bowl of “fat-tailed sheep” soup, and I got the biggest piece because I was the guest. **Drinking a bowl of wet sheep tail was not something I recognized as an introduction into Mongolian culture, it was just a little over-the-top and I needed baby steps.**

I watched as a girl around 14 years of age put dried horse manure into the stove as fuel, she also added a few choice cow pies (dried cow manure). After she stoked the fire, she rolled out dough on a mat on the floor, filled them with meat and squeezed them shut with her fingers. I forgot to tell you, there was no running water or a bathroom or any way to wash hands. So, the cooking process was, stoke the fire with manure, roll the dough, added meat and close the dough, all without and cleaning of hands. The steamed dough balls were filled with horse meat and were considered a great meal by the Mongolian nomadic people.

Most people want something familiar and filling, not some elaborate taste they have never experienced before. Some of the people I used to see on Sundays have never been fed any of the spiritual foods I have. After over 20 years of doing Sunday services at the jail, I learned early on not to force feed “Spiritual Food” that people were not ready to eat. Some of the food took a long time to get used to, but once people became familiar with the food, they began to want more and more. The nourishment also leads people to trust other foods I presented.

LET’S GO FISHING!

In 1999, Deacon Irv Vaske, asked me if I was around on Wednesday for a quick lunch. I said sure where at; he said I will pick you up and take you. On Wednesday, Deacon IRV picked me up and we drove two miles west of my farm and said here we are. It was the old County home that was just made into the new County jail. Lunch at the jail, I asked? Irv said: “Why not, they need to eat too.”

Over a lunch of jail food, we met with the head jailer about Irv’s plan to start church services for the Inmates. I agreed to have lunch with Irv, but I did not sign up for Sunday services. But anyone who knew Irv, knew this was how he got people involved in things they never thought of doing. **He started feeding me familiar food and then we got to all types of wonderful banquets within the jail.**

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Going through the process of getting into jail for the first time, really gave me a different understanding of what type of environment I was entering. Everything was grey concrete and steel, very overwhelming when the door slams and shuts you away from the outside. The room we were to use as our "Church" was the legal library not much bigger than 15 X 15ft. **IRV was leading me in a safer way to serve, where I could do the most good.** But the first services were joyous and difficult at the same time.



The first service we had about 10 curious men, all with some church going background. **The first thing I noticed, everyone had on orange sandals; I had the "Church of the Sandals" that I joked about when I was in Deaconate formation classes.** The inmates were respectful and very appreciative that we came to help, but it was obvious that **some of the Spiritual food we served was like my experience in Mongolia.** Months went by and every Sunday at about 9:00 am Irv and I would show up and direct non-denominational religious services, one for the men and one for the women. There were a multitude of different needs and a multitude of different experiences of religious disappointments. **I soon realized that the food we were serving needed to be comfort food; familiar and tasty.**

SPEAK LORD I'M LISTENING

It was becoming clear that we had to make our services more digestible and acceptable. After my ordination in October of 2003, Jail ministry was a great joy but still a struggle at times. **I started to see that I needed to find leaders among the inmates and to empower them to preach the Gospel to other inmates that did not come on Sundays. The inmate leaders grew the church and paved the way to a rebirth of the Church of the sandals.**

One Sunday, a giant of a man walked through the door to the Jail Services, I had to stand on the tips of my toes just to find a narrow enough place to put my arms around him. He said: "well that was totally unexpected, a fresh taste of Church." I said "I am Gary the "preacher, teacher, and cook for today's meal of God's word, spiced with the Holy Spirit. He said they call me "Tank", I think it is because of my size and my self-made armor. I have not set foot in a church in over 30 years, and I wasn't about to come today except for the stories people tell about the services and what happens in here."

Tank was about 6' 10 and 400 pounds, with a face full of hair and eyes full of darkness; he was someone you did not want to get angry. I thanked him for coming and did not say anything more; this is where experience kicks in and the Holy Spirit takes over. Tank said : "they don't feed us well here and I am very hungry."

HEAL ME LORD!

January 2004, I was involved in an extremely serious accident that left me with permanent brain damage and terrible physical pain. This was the time when "I" was fed spiritual food by the inmates. **When we get to the end of ourselves, we get to the beginning of God. When I gave the Holy Spirit control of my ministry that is when it became miraculous.**

GOD STILL MOVES!

Let's go back to Tank. He was considerate, but he did ask the hard questions that would try to prove to himself that religion was man trying to control instead of God nourishing and sustaining our souls. We do Bible study after the Sunday readings. But they are nothing like most people have experienced. Typically, there is a well thought out theme that is initiated by construction paper cut outs, or stacks of papers with words relating to the Gospel, with reality on an unseen side. I tell the men now you will see the Holy Spirit in action, this is not practiced or made up.

Our lesson with Tank was picked from all the face down words to see if you get one that really talks to you and what you need to let God have a better control of in your life. Tank picked one and his face turned really red. When I asked for anyone to share, he was the first one. Tank said " I am sitting far away from someone in here that hurt me and my family really bad. He stood up and looked at me and he said "actually I felt like picking him up and breaking him in little pieces when I first walked into church." He slowly walked over to a very small 18 year old man, looked at him and said, "I know I have been given a sign because all I could think about was hurting you really bad and now I want to ask you if I can give you a hug?"

The room went silent because a hug from Tank could be fatal. The 18 year old said "yes," stood up and they hugged. Weeping, **Tank held up the word he had picked unknowingly from the pile: FORGIVENESS.** He said "I was self-destructing because I could not forgive this man, now I know why God called me to Sunday service today."



When we get to the end of ourselves, we get to the beginning of God. God is a seeker. God makes the first call, and we respond --- after we have received a divinely constant outpouring of mercy, forgiveness compassion and love. Respond to God in your life today!