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An Afternoon in Trenton

Nate and Jim. Two names which in the course of an afternoon visit to Trenton Penitentiary would become more than just names. These two men would become very real people to me and in a very special way, friends.

It was during the course of a year as a Christian education volunteer at Grace Church in Elizabeth NJ that I first heard about Nate. Nate is serving an indeterminate sentence for a crime which he maintains he never committed. The parish family of Grace Church, as a part of its outreach mission, has been a source of support to Nate and his family as they have sought to appeal his guilty verdict and produce a new trial. I learned over the course of my year at Grace Church that this would be no easy task. It helped drive home the point that prisoners are often forgotten people. It seems that once they are behind walls the prisoners are quickly forgotten by those of us on the out-side. Ask yourself what it must be like to be forgotten.

And so I was glad when the Rev. Glen Chalmers, vicar of Grace Church, gave me the opportunity to join him, his wife Marcy, and Nate's mother Irene in visiting Nate.

Strengthened by our common worship that morning we headed off to Trenton. During the trip I was trying to come to terms with my own preconceptions and stereotypes of prisons and prisoners — images I had allowed myself to build up unchallenged over the years. I had a vision of unsmiling cons in striped uniforms ready to take advantage of any opportunity to break out, to escape over the walls. I had mental pictures of men as cold as the walls that contained them. I was glad, after the visit, to admit I had been wrong on all these points.

Prior to meeting Nate and his friend Jim, we had to go through an extraordinary security procedure. First we passed through a metal detector, and then all were frisked, including the children. Even cigarette packages were opened and searched. Although I did not know it at the time, the prisoners were undergoing a similar search.

We were then led into a rather pleasant, though somewhat institutional meeting room where our "contact visit" would take place. Shortly after we sat down Nate, Jim and the other men came in. The room was a sea of handshakes, hugs and kisses, as these men found their friends, their children, wives and loved ones. We exchanged our greetings with Nate and Jim and then sat down for some 90 minutes to talk, share and listen. Our friends did most of the talking, and we in turn were able to exercise a ministry of listening. We listened to their hopes, frustrations, jokes and even a critique of the previous night's baseball game. It is obvious that prison life is very lonely, and visits are very intense, both for the prisoner and the visitor.

In looking round the room, I saw happiness. It seemed that at least for a short while prison was forgotten. Children were playing with their fathers, husbands were hugging their wives, and brothers talking with brothers. There was a real family atmosphere. Time, however, moved on, and we finally had to make our farewells. The prisoners were separated, counted and strip-searched in an annex; only then were we allowed to leave.

In looking back on this visit, I see that it gave me a chance to be, in a small way, a caring and I hope affirming presence. We did not make this visit to sit in judgment on either Nate or Jim. Such judgment, be it accurate or not, has already been made by our criminal justice system. We went as friends to affirm and share some of that love which God has so freely shared with us. All of us should seek to discover new ways of sharing ourselves and our love with others. We may be shocked at the results.

Br. Stephen Storen is vocations director for the Brotherhood. He recently spent a year as a Christian education volunteer at Grace Church, Elizabeth NJ.

The Homeless: still with us

The poor will always be with you in the land , and for that reason I command you to be open-handed . -- Deut . 15:11

I hope not to belabor the point concerning the homeless and needy, but this summer has proved that our work is not finished. The White Plains Post Office Shelter , of which I wrote a few months ago, is now closed. It will soon house office personnel instead of those without shelter; its larders will be filled with office supplies or perhaps computer equipment instead of food and clothing . It will no longer live with the love of serving our brothers and sisters in need .

But then, the homeless are no longer with us, are they? In the warmth of summer and the lovely fall , who needs a roof over their heads, right?

We need the needy: we need all the helpless, hungry souls of our world to allow the love of God, which we have experienced in Christ, to discover an object of expression. His love wells up inside us waiting for a meeting with the despairing of this world. The needy offer us an opportunity to obey the command of Christ that we love our neighbor .

We minister to Christ when we minister to them. Christ is to be found in the cries of those who need us. It is we who are in many ways the needy. Come closer to the stranger in the ditch . Don't turn away . Look into his or her face. Do you recognize that person? It's you.

It's you , ambushed by some personal crisis. It is you, fearful of the future. You were on the road to Jericho, attacked and beaten -- and someone stopped to help you. Think back in your life and try to remember someone who came to your aid. You were the helpless one and Christ flooded your life with love . Remember the miracle and forgiveness which mended your broken and bleeding soul . Someone helped you.

When you think of what God has done for you, you will not be able to resist sharing with others. Get involved with the homeless. They are you.

RTB

Here and there with the Brotherhood . . .

COMMUNITY NOTES

BALTIMORE / WASHINGTON: Br. Thaddeus David Williams spent a weekend visiting Br. Edward Munro. They joined Br . Thomas Martin Little for a trip to the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, and attended the eucharist at Mount Calvary Church. They paid a call on the Catonsville convent of the All Saints Sisters of the Poor , along with Mr. Robert Zopfi.

SUFFERN NY: Brs. James E. Teets and Tobias Stanislas Haller were guests of the the Rev . Andrews, rector of Christ Church. The brothers had a good visit with Br . John Francis Jones and his wife Maryellen, who are coordinating Christian education for the parish young people . Br . Tobias preached at the Sunday morning eucharist , during an electrical storm that was quite appropriate for the text from Jeremiah . One parish member commented afterward that not everyone is so

fortunate as to have his sermon choreographed by Cecil B. DeMille!

MENDHAM NJ: Brothers from Province H participated in the annual Commemoration Day eucharist at the Convent of St . John Baptist here. Br. Richard Thomas Biernacki was organist for the occasion, and was joined by Br . Tobias, who played recorder descants on the hymns, along with Margo Kolkebeck , flutist . Br . William Bunting was crucifer , and Brs. James and John Francis were the acolytes of the mass. Also attending were Brs. William Francis Jones, Stephen Storen , and Companion Maryellen Jones . This event has become a yearly occasion for our brothers to renew the long friendship with Mother Suzanne Elizabeth and the sisters of the Community of St . John Baptist.