

HOLINESS BEHIND BARS

by Mary Esther Stewart, OFS

“In the field of the world, in human hearts, lies hid the treasure of eternal love.”

St. Clare’s 3rd letter to St. Agnes of Prague



Esther: The phone rang. “Would you be willing to mentor a young man in prison who wants to be a Franciscan?” What a question! What a surprise! I’m always eager to share my life with anyone who is interested, but I never imagined being asked to share our Franciscan life with a prisoner on the other side of the United States.

I readily agreed. Then what I had agreed to hit me! Who is this fellow? What risk might I be taking? What am I getting into? My thoughts and doubts went on, but I didn’t back out. I asked that the young man write to me telling me about himself and what it was that he really wanted. I had to believe, “If the Spirit is in this, it will work out.”

In Joe’s first letter to me, he was open about himself, his past, and his sentence. He sounded very sincere in wanting to get involved in the Franciscan family. I decided to give him a chance.

Joe: I’m a convicted felon in a state prison. Getting me off the streets saved my life and maybe the lives of others. As I sit here “doing time,” I realize that my past is behind me. All I have is the present moment and what the future may bring. I want to be a Franciscan.

I made some big mistakes in my life. I was looking for the family that I never had, but I was looking in all the wrong places. Then one day we were

visited by a prison minister who introduced me to a new family, the Franciscans. Whatever this guy had, I knew I wanted. He introduced me to the writings of St. Francis, and it was all uphill from there. I knew that in Francis I had found a brother, a model, and a soulmate.

I took a risk, a leap of faith, and connected with this lady who I may never meet. Will she judge me? Will I be a threat to her? Will she accept me with the love that I know I need? I put the stamp on the letter and put the letter on the mail cart. Then I waited patiently.

Esther: I figured that Joe probably didn’t know much about Francis and Franciscan life. My ego told me that I could certainly keep him busy with much more than he could ever give me. But the teacher in me said that first I had to test his willingness to take on our way of life.

I explained to Joe a process of using the Gospel of the day as a basis for contemplation paired with journaling and the personal value of such a prayer practice. If he didn’t want to do this, then there was no need for us to go any further. Joe had not had any experience of contemplative prayer using the Gospels, but he agreed to give it a try following the directions I gave him.

As we began sharing our reactions to the Gospels, I discovered a real depth to Joe. He would drop little remarks that stopped me in my tracks; he had wisdom and insights that really spoke to me. Several times Joe brought me to my knees with his comments and observations. I might be Joe’s mentor in Franciscan things, but Joe was quickly becoming my mentor, too.

Joe: There isn’t a lot for me to do in here. I pray a lot. But Esther introduced me to a new way of praying by getting directly into the Gospels every day. I wasn’t too sure about the writing part, but she encouraged me, and I gave it a try. It didn’t take long for me to discover a treasure that I didn’t want to give up. I began to teach the guys in here

how to pray with the Gospels. Some seem to be taking to it.

My life in here can be pretty grim at times, but I was open with Esther when she asked, and she didn't "scare off." Instead of treating me like a curiosity that needed "fixing," she joked about my fancy hotel, room service, and my five-star dining. We both got a good laugh.

Trust is hard in here. Any trust I had on the streets went out the window when the handcuffs went on. In here, we're trapped and we're alone. Esther was an answer to my prayers by introducing me to some super Franciscans like St. Bonaventure. As we work through our Franciscan sources, I'm more convinced that Franciscan life is for me. She now has phone privileges, and we have wonderful conversations including praying together. Nothing has scared her away. I'm beginning to trust, and I feel accepted.

Esther: I recently told Joe that I am his outside and he is my inside. I hope I'm taking him beyond the razor wire. We talk about ordinary things on the "inside" and on the "outside." We laugh a lot. Other times Joe has questions about our Franciscan theology and spirituality, which I love to discuss with him. But we both feel that, most importantly, our interaction has allowed us to build trust in each other.

I have come to see my world through Joe's eyes. The more I got to know Joe, the more I realized that he can't do all that I do. When he's on the road, he's in handcuffs and shackles and no stops at McDonald's. My walk with Joe is rough; just knowing about his life shakes me out of my comfort zone. I can no longer take my privileges and freedoms for granted. My prison friend is total gift.

Yes, Joe is surrounded by razor wire. I hope to take him beyond it. My relationship with him has made me realize that I, too, am surrounded by razor wire. I've put up a lot of razor wire that keeps God out of my self-sufficient, independent lifestyle. Lord, give me the courage to be humble,

to admit my need for You. Joe is my mentor, Your gift to me.

Joe: Nobody comes to prison to get a dose of love, acceptance, or encouragement. Maybe there was trust when I first got involved in criminal activity, but even that can disappear really fast. In our correspondence, Esther gives me hope that love and friendship are really alive and not just a fantasy. I did not imagine that I would discover love and trust while in here, especially from someone on the outside who's free to interact with people of her own choosing. Who would choose to love and trust a convict?

Esther keeps reassuring me that I am loved more abundantly by God than my little heart or mind could possibly understand. If I'm loved by Him and by those who love Him, then I, too, need to love and trust because I am loved. It is a cycle of unending love. I cannot hoard that love, not only because I'm Franciscan at heart and we truly embrace poverty and love, but because being loved is a call to love others.

Esther's family can be my family, her Franciscan fraternity family can be mine, too. And my family grows with each prayer I offer for the people she has told me about. What I've received from our friendship has given me strength to share with the men I live with, to build them up and give them hope, to let them know that each day can begin with love because they are loved.

Conclusion: Joe and Esther keep right on going with their communications day-by-day, little by little. We share our lives and what's going on with each of us. We share our love and our trust for each other. All we have is NOW. We have hope and new purpose to our lives. We believe that together we are an inside-outside team that can accomplish a much greater purpose than what we ever could have imagined.

Guidelines for Prison Ministry for Secular Franciscans can be found on the National website: <https://secularfranciscansusa.org/guidelines-forms-other-resources/> Select *National Guidelines*.

MaryEsther Stewart, ofc, is a Secular Franciscan living in northern Arizona and formation director for St. Thomas More Region. Joseph M. is an inmate in a Florida correctional institution. Together they walk in love, trust, and friendship. They attempt to be instruments of God's love to those with whom they come in contact. MaryEsther can be contacted at maryestherstewart@gmail for information about writing to prison inmates.