

Beyond the Razor Wire

Planning a Retreat Day inside Dallas, Pennsylvania State Correctional Institution is like no other planning! What could go wrong, or amiss, will certainly happen - before the day, during arrival with security issues, and even after, with departure security red tape.



When Fr. Peter used to visit, there were always stumbling blocks to overcome and on 5th October this year, without him, it was certainly no different. Instead of the Chapel we were in an awkward auditorium; the Retreat day internal promotion had been mishandled so that many men were unaware and therefore not signed up for it; the auditorium held many problems (sound, seating, OHS safety, etc), and the protestant chaplain supervisor had us under strict surveillance.

It was quite a warm day and look out if you ask to move to a cooler area of the room, as I did. For an instant I felt treated like an inmate, not a visitor! I toed the line for the remainder of the day, lest I be thrown out, or worse kept there!

“We” the team, was made up of myself, husband Bob, brother-in-law George, and Chief Dan Daly a retired Captain of FDNY. Dan was a good mate of Father Peter’s since they first met 3 days prior to 9/11. Dan lost many good mates and was a first responder during 9/11.

Our programmed Retreat was to be a day of Memory and Celebration of the life of their good friend from Down Under, Passionist, Father Peter McGrath.

The authorities had allotted us a day, but when you break down lunch times, inmate counts and call outs, we had two sessions totalling less than 4 hours, two hours in the morning, and again in the afternoon! Our first session had 9 men turn up. There used to be a coffee break, but not so anymore. However, our ‘supervisor’ assured us that we, the team, could certainly have coffee. You guess it, we declined without any hesitation!

Sr. Mary invited us to her Mercy Convent for lunch. She works as a part-time Chaplain at Dallas SCI and had made a special trip from a Retreat she was on to be with us. She is extremely caring and concerned for the men, but with age and the physical demands within the razor wires, she will soon be retiring from a full-time role.

After lunch we returned to the prison (ongoing security issues from trying to leave the prison for lunch without ID, and now more as one of us had left ID left in the car after lunch!) for our second session with 10 men who had not been at the morning session.

All through the day we shared prayers, music, laughs and beautiful memories. It was sad to realise that more than a few men who Peter had met in 1992 are still behind the razor wire – two or more have been there for over 45 years!

Our prayers were many – from a heart-felt Our Father to Beannacht (John O’Donohue) which they loved from the time Fr. Peter first recited it to them. In between we shared Passionist Reflections, FDNY inspirational stories, Aboriginal Spirituality and personal stories and memories of the men.

Bob is involved in the RSL and with our Australian veterans and he talked about US and Australian veteran relationships in WWI through to the present day. It was good to see that each group contained a handful of veterans, so we thanked them for their service, which is an unusual occurrence inside the razor wire.

The music was a blessing with George, self-taught fiddle player, along with inmate, Warren, also self-taught, on guitar. Their music was so very welcome with their rendition of the beautiful Civil War hymn, Ashokan Farewell, had us feeling a deep sense of loss – from the past and certainly into the present.

The men are all keen to continue with the Christmas pen-pals, started by Fr. Peter, which now must be handled differently due to drugs being smuggled in through chemicals being sprayed on papers/letters/cards etc. Even a Bible is now banned! At every turn, these men seem to be stopped from communication with the outside world. The new email system and addresses will be advised to the Passionist Companions of Terrey Hills.

Leaving the prison, we were very grateful for the sacred privilege granted to be able to share with men who receive so little from the outside. We cannot abandon them, and through your faithful pen-pal communications this is achieved. Thank you to everyone who participates and to those who may like to take part in the future.

Barbara Lunnon
Passionist Companion, Terrey Hills



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