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Guest Voices



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David enters the glass-enclosed room and greets me. We've met before, at the time he was first arrested years ago. Like then, his eyes strike me. Back then, I felt like

Jesus Christ was looking out at me from his catatonic stare. It isn't the same stare now. In his orange jumpsuit, with his hands and arms tightly cuffed and chained together at his waist, he smiles tentatively. I glance at his feet where another set of chains constrain him. Like an animal, I think. Could he be dangerous? Might he feel extra vulnerable? I ask anyway, "Can I hug you?" He nods yes and I do. We sit in the two facing plastic chairs, and I move the small round table between us.

I visited this 30-year old son of a friend of mine in prison today. I am a Catholic priest and prison chaplain. David is in the "hole" for thirty days. That means solitary confinement, unable to see anyone but his lawyer and me. David's mother — I'll call her "Angie" — is understandably distraught over this, as well as from his recent transfer to this jail from a mental hospital. He had been confined there since murdering someone during a psychotic breakdown five years ago. I don't know all of the circumstances of his present situation, including why he is back at the prison. All I know is that I am overwhelmed as I leave the visiting room. I sit I my car in the prison parking lot, tears filling my eyes. I read his mother's words from a card that I earlier read aloud to David.

> I am searching, searching for meaning in all this. How did we end up here? Why? How do we accept this? Should we accept this, really? How do we manage the anger, the loss of faith? How do we live now? How do we begin to heal? Tell us what we are supposed to do, God! We are waiting for signs, answers.

I've been serving in prison chaplaincy for over 12 years now. I am going on 80 years old. Our prison ministry group in Philadelphia, Adeodatus, writes these prayer cards up with the words of the inmates themselves and some of their parents on the back. The hope is that those who read them will be moved to empathy for the parents at least, and maybe also the inmates themselves whom I visit.

> I pray constantly for answers. I find myself repeating the Hail Mary over and over again — when I awake, while walking the dog, in the shower, running to work — "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee…" I wonder, is the Lord really with us? Why has God forsaken us, I ask.

Angie's plight stabs my heart. Her prayer too. "Hail Mary…" Where is my faith in these moments? Is it as real as hers? As fragile? And yet, I see on occasion the gaze of Christ looking back at me from the prisoners' eyes. Jesus Christ is in prison! He told us that when we visit someone there, we visit him. Is he actually imprisoned in them? And in us as well? What are my prisons?

> We worked hard. We were determined to beat this mental illness thing. My boy, he suffered so much. I had faith that together we could figure it out. I felt sure he would thrive — I believed with God at his side, he could become the man he wanted to be — a kind, sensitive, effective young man. I am desperately searching for Peace. I am hoping the deep, profound sadness that tortures my heart will somehow lift! I pray this nightmare will pass. My boy prays too. He prays for a miracle, his miracle. Oh, that the violent episode was merely a delusion of his mind. And that his guardian angel really could protect and save us from ourselves and others. Together we cry. We wait for God's sign. I pray, "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee?"

At the conclusion of our visit, I promise to try to see him again, then ask if we can pray. David nods okay. At first we sit in silence. Soon I open my hands. David sits looking at me, so I begin, "Lord, I lift up to you this young man and his mother, and all of those in prison. Be with them in their isolation. Please find a way to heal them and free them as you promised to us all." I glance at him with his hands chained and wait. David says, "God, please help me … I'm lost in here … I need you. Have mercy, especially on my mother … she doesn't deserve this. And help those I've harmed to find some peace … Oh, and bless Father Paul too."

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Soon we stand to leave. I gesture to hug him again and we do. As David shuffles in his chains out into the corridor, I think of Mary's boy, Jesus. What she might have felt during his passion. Was her faith as raw as Angie's? Who did Mary pray to? I think of David's victim and his family. The pain and the loss, the cries to God and to the universe from all of these people. Give me another day or year to visit these people, Lord. And even if there is a question mark at the end, let me pray the Hail Mary.

[Augustian Fr. Paul F. Morrissey is the founder and former director of Adeodatus Prison Ministry.]