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Gratitude for our Easter people

by Thomas C. Fox

Doing Time: Finding Hope at San Quentin

By Dennis Burke

Paulist Press, 130 pages, \$14.95

Author Dennis Burke died at age 77 on March 29th with his family gathered around his bedside. He lived with his wife, Patty, in San Rafael, Calif. where for the past several years he was living with ALS (Lou Gehrig's Disease).

Burke, a former chaplain at San Quentin prison, the most famous of California's state prisons, was the author of *Doing Time: Finding Hope at San Quentin* (Paulist Press). From 1996 through 2006 he worked with prisoners in San Quentin and the book is based on this experience. This is an impressive book by an impressive author. It takes the reader on two paths, each containing rich elements of the larger human tapestry.

If the first path appears, at first glance, to be crafted out of cruelty, despair and hardness of heart, read on. We learn, as Burke did, that inmates require much of this superficial callousness in order to survive. Beneath it, were one to listen and risk, as Burke did, one can find loneliness, longing, weakness, humor, love, even hope. This second path is Burke's path; it's his story of what he learned in San Quentin and how it changed him and his perceptions.

It takes a unique person, one with patience, self-awareness and openness, to be trusted enough to gather prisoners' stories. And if that unique person also happens to be a gifted author with the ability to tell reflective stories with grace and wit, the result can be masterful, as was the case with *Doing Time*.

Burke entered prison ministry "almost accidentally," he wrote, when a prison chaplain approached him in 1996 and asked him to help out on Sundays. Those Sundays grew to weekdays, as well. As Burke

explained to a group of friends recently, "I loved the poor and the down-and-out, loved being with them. It was a chance to act as a priest again ... putting on the alb and stole and preaching ? running a Communion service that had everything but the consecration." Impishly, he said, "One day I asked [the priest], 'Weren't we breaking church law?' He tossed up his hands and said, 'It's OK. That's why we have these big walls here.' "

Big walls, indeed. But not too big to contain Burke's mischievous character and his defiant attitude toward misguided authority. Post-Vatican II Catholics like Burke understand this terrain better than most. So Burke knew the value of liberation and, in the final analysis, offered it generously to countless incarcerated souls.

As Burke told the tale, his impressions, experiences and insights become our own. We begin to see beyond our own preconceptions and prejudices, developing empathy. As the title indicates, this book is really about hope, the most precious of virtues. If hope is to be found in the sweat, heat and grime of prison life, it can be found elsewhere, in other tortured areas of our world and hearts. And we need to be so reminded.

Burke's curriculum vitae revealed a healthy variety of career choices, including priest, theology teacher, manager, consultant, human resources director and prison minister. Burke was continually inspired and supported by his wife, Patty.

So we are grateful to Burke and ministers like him for "doing time." They are our Easter people. They remind us, through their acts of compassion, that spirit can win ? no, that spirit does win! ? and that it cannot be crushed as long as some of us listen to, nurture and encourage each other.

The following is one of Burke's favorite Psalms:

"As a doe longs
for running streams,
so longs my soul
for you, my God."
- Psalm 42

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Condolences can be offered to Patty Burke at: Pttyburke@yahoo.com. Or you can write to: Patty Burke, 353 Bay Way, San Rafael, CA 94901.

(Tom Fox is NCR editor. His e-mail address is tfox@ncronline.org.)

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