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Encounters with Mandela, the spiritual giant

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The life of Nelson Mandela, who died yesterday at the age of 95, was virtually unparalleled in examples of forgiveness and humility. I feel blessed to have had two personal encounters with this spiritual giant. The first came ten years back, when, in Washington having lunch with the late NCR columnist Jesuit Fr. Robert Drinan, Mandela unexpectedly appeared. It was shortly after Drinan and I had arrived and we were still standing near the door waiting to be seated. Drinan turned around and with that large Drinan grin, approached the former South African president. Mandela quickly recognized Drinan. The two shook hands firmly expressing warm greetings. I cannot imagine two larger human rights advocates in a single room. And there they were, embracing, smiling as they spoke. After several seconds, Drinan turned to me and introduced me to Mandela who looked lean, tall and handsome.

My second Mandela encounter was of a different kind. It came on Jan. 20, 2012, when my wife, Hoa, and I, visiting South African, took a boat out to Robben Island, where Mandela had been held as a political prisoner for 18 of his 27 years behind bars. During a tour of the prison we learned we would not be taken to Mandela's cell. So we slipped away from the group and set off on our own through the now vacant prison complex. We had no clue what would happen next, but it was our only chance.

Within minutes we ran into several prison keepers, sitting at a table in a small room playing cards. I quickly asked if one of them might take us to Mandela's cell. Why not? Either we would be thrown out or we'd get a unique visit. Either way it would be a good story. As it turned out, one of the men volunteered to take us. After walking across several dusty prison yards and down two long prison corridors we came to Mandela's cell - number 5 in block B near the end of the corridor. Suddenly I felt the weight of a large empty silence. So quiet and sacred at once. Our soft voices echoed in the cell block. My took my cell phone and began to record a short video. I said a few words in front of the cell. As I spoke the prison keeper unexpectedly handed me the key to the small cell, which looked out into a court yard. The iron key

felt large and heavy, maybe a pound. I put the key in the lock, something I knew Mandela would have never been allowed to do. I turned it, opening the barred door. As I looked inside, I instinctively knew I should not enter. The grounds were simply too sacred to walk on.

What a privileged to have had such encounters.

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