

Be Mardel

religious  
of the  
sacred heart



Helen Janohoe typed  
and mailed this for me.

August 10, 1973

Dear All,

I guess I always thought "Letters from Prison" would be the easiest and most natural occupation for one who was locked up, but I'm not alone in finding it almost impossible to write, especially to those one loves the most. The state of uncertainty that we've been in for eleven days, the constant noise (fifty-five women and girls in one room day and night is not too easy on the nerves), the difficulty we've found in concentrating or memorizing, and the rapidly changing situation, all make me keep putting off writing. But I know that the chief reason is that the whole experience is so inexpressible! It has been a revelation of another world at our doorstep, where beautiful, loving, warm, generous, courageous people have so little power, are so put down and know so little about what to do to remedy the pain of their lives. It has been a microcosm of life seeing a community of diverse people move together through shared anxiety, courage, belief in a mission, shared faith, shared suffering, laughter, teasing, anger and self-sacrifice. From one's narrow double bunk a little world is able to be observed. It has been an education in prison life: watching the guards; the regular prisoners; feeling one's own sense of anger and frustration when the cage door is locked behind you, when husbands and wives can't even speak to each other except by making signs to each other at a distance, when your friends can't bring you candy because "There might be drugs hidden in it". But most of all it has been a most beautiful, deep religious experience. The calibre of the sixteen nuns in our group is super! We're the most unlikely group to end in jail, really. Only two have ever been involved in any kind of social action or poverty work, and all were on their way home to important dates and commitments after July 31st. We have shared very honestly with each other: our struggles, our fears, our growing realizations and insights as to why the Spirit led us here. It has been a real spiritual adventure for Carol (Naumann), Rita Anne Houlihan, Mary Ellen Moore, Judy Best and a few others who are making a directed retreat under Rita according to the 19th Annotation of the Spiritual Exercises. Six of us, plus two Protestant lay women, meet individually with Rita once a day to get "ghostly counsel" (usually on an upper bunk).

As I glanced over my "journal" which Rita asked us to keep daily, I was struck by the way the Spirit has led me since August 3rd, when I began with "by waiting and by calm you will be saved...in quiet and in trust your strength lies" (Is. 30:15), to comfort in "how happy you will be to suffer persecution for justice...what happiness will be yours when people blame you..." (Matt. 5:10). Fr. Neil Doherty, S.J. (New York Province) gave us a homily that deeply struck me: "...our effectiveness in this struggle in Fresno will be in proportion to our union with Jesus and to our love for His brothers and sisters.

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August 5th was the Silver Jubilee of a sister "next door", who stood and faced us all at Mass and renewed her commitment to God and "to you, my brothers and sisters, to struggle for justice for all men." One - no, two - great helps to me these days have been Concha's conferences given to the Assembly of Provincial Teams in Europe, July 1973 (Magnificent!!!) and IDOC papers which I've been trying to find time to read for 3 months! They quote from Medellin Papers, Peace #18 (Jan. '73): "Those who do not act in favor of justice with the means at hand and remain passive for fear of the sacrifices and personal risks that every bold and efficient action implies are also responsible for that injustice." (Compunction!!)

August 6th...meditation on the Kingdom...realization growing that never before have I felt more a religious, an RSCJ, than this week - able to express somehow, externally, that which I really am. So much else is stripped away here.

August 7 - 8 - 9: Trial - an unjust trial - and passion of Jesus. Struggle with frustration, anxiety, sympathy with so much suffering around me (Judy, whose Provincial is very upset, others whose parents are worried, so many ChiCanos concerned about their little children alone at home, etc.).

Today, the 10th, we know this may be an even longer struggle for a fair trial, and that our victory is not yet. Philippians 1 - all of it - says so much!

I hope you all realize how deeply grateful we are for all you are doing for us outside, day and night. Please keep it up! Helen has not stopped for breath since she returned that memorable July 31st, and much good has come from her efforts, as from Sally's contacts and calls, and Trudy's. Trudy got Dianne Feinstein to call me and she is trying to help ("Mother Mardel, what are YOU doing in jail?"). Trudy also was able to get Mr. Mayo Mohs, Religion editor of Time, New York, to call me and he intends to do a story on the problem. He is very sympathetic to the cause of the farm workers - "You're doing just what the Bishops are telling us to do", he said, and was interested to know that Dorothy Day was here (what an inspiration that old lady is to all of us!), that Bishops Metzger from El Paso and Arzube from Los Angeles, with eight priests, said Mass for the 150 of us in the "yard" (a lovely lawn all around our dorms, surrounded by high cyclone fence, barbed wire and padlocked gates). Dorothy Day says she does not think 62 priests and nuns have ever been arrested at one time in one place for the same cause before. She is delighted, of course.

The ludicrous and ridiculous pictures are certainly not lacking: sitting in jail for ten days on a misdemeanor, listening to Watergate (our TV has sound but no picture - only 2 stations, Fresno and a Spanish station); and Sr. Timothy riding to court in an armored police car, a rifle next to her head, and the driver turning to ask her "Sister, what's the Church's stand on Teilhard de Chardin now?"

Sr. Braganza's letter to "the Sisters of the California Province" touched me deeply, as I'm sure it will you. I'm seeing life really lived in common here, where all is shared. We nuns have shared our telegrams and letters for mutual support and many - in fact, all but two - have received great encouragement and support in their stand from those in authority: Srs. Margaret Brennan and Ethne Kennedy, Network, Sumore, and many other groups, too, see the urgency of struggle for the rights of the 1st Amendment, whether one goes along with Chavez or not. The cause is MUCH bigger than the UFW or the Teamsters, and we're

realizing this more every day we're here.

You've been so wonderful in writing and driving the long way down to see us, and I don't have to say that we are praying to be home soon!! Every day brings hopes, rumors, disappointments. I recommend jail as a built-in situation geared to Ignatian spirituality - "Take, O Lord, all my liberty..."

I'm well, at peace, so glad I've had this experience, hoping it will end soon, and thinking much of each one of you, that "His power may be in you."

In Jesus, our strength,

Be Mardel, RSCJ  
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ADDENDA

Last night when I arrived home from Fresno, after being released from jail, I called Sr. Camacho in London, for Sr. Mardel and myself, in order to bring her up to date on the situation. She told me that the Central Team had sent a cable to Be as soon as they received the news, and were concerned, as well, that all of us know of their love and support in this "time of suffering" and that, in their words, "we are living with you."

With much gratitude to all for support,

*Carol Naumann*  
Carol Naumann, RSCJ  
Provincial House

Enc.



AIDS MINISTRY: Be Mardel, RSCJ

12/31/90

WOMEN and their increasing vulnerability to AIDS was the emphasis on December 2, 1990, as more than 100 nations observed World AIDS Day. I learned that AIDS is the leading cause of death in women aged 15-44 in New York City and is expected to be the fifth leading cause of death in women that age in the United States in 1990. The Women's AIDS Network points out that "A Latina or African-American woman is 5 to 15 times more likely to be diagnosed with AIDS than a white woman."

Such statistics are part of the on-going orientation and "opening-up" that I have been undergoing in my AIDS ministry in San Francisco. "Where one stands and looks determines what one sees; whom one listens to determines what one hears..." (A Sharper Focus, Introduction.) It has now been more than two years since I began working with the Most Holy Redeemer Support Group for Persons with AIDS, located in the Castro district. Already in the 1970's a major center in the nation for the gay/lesbian population, "the Castro" has seen a huge influx since 1982 because of the availability of services for persons with HIV infection.

My work, in a small office located in the rectory of Most Holy Redeemer Parish, consists chiefly in work on the Macintosh -- keeping records and mailing lists up-to-date, getting out letters and reports, answering the telephone and trying to deal with myriad emergencies that arise. I occasionally drive clients to the hospital for treatments, as well as doing "intakes" in their homes to determine whether or not our volunteers will be able to help a particular person with AIDS. Our approximately 100 volunteers are prepared twice a year in a three-day intensive Training Session, and then, if accepted, are assigned on a one-to-one basis with a client for as long as they are needed. The volunteer agrees to provide a minimum of six hours a week of emotional and/or practical support to his or her client and all attend a bi-weekly volunteer support group where they learn to deal with their own frustrations, depression and fears. Personally, I have found this to be a most enriching experience and I have grown very close to the six or seven men (all gay) who make up our group. (Oh yes, recently Jim, a new volunteer, a married man with six grown children, has joined us.) I have not only learned first-hand what suffering is entailed in rejection, being discriminated against most of one's life and in feeling "bad", but I have been and continue to be deeply moved by the example of self-giving, compassion and courage of these men.

Exposure to and close contact, over the past two years, with an utterly new culture (i.e. "new" to me) has changed many of my preconceived ideas and unconscious prejudices. During a Reflection Day for Care-givers of AIDS patients which I attended last year, I was moved by the observation of one of the leaders: "I believe that it was providential that AIDS began in the United States with the gay population. It has forced us, through compassion, to examine our prejudices against homosexuals."

In addition to individual support for our approximately 70 clients, MHR provides, at no charge, six weekly support groups for those with AIDS, ARC, and for families and lovers of persons with HIV infection. I, too, have a client, a gentle 62 year-old black man, Bill, who has recently become seriously ill and was hospitalized just before Christmas. Because one is constantly dealing with death and dying, with tragedy and loss, the AIDS ministry can be very heavy. I have certainly found this to be true, and I have tried to give myself "space" when it was needed. But the heaviness is largely offset for me by the inspiration I receive from the dedicated staff, the volunteers and the clients themselves, who so often are able to face an early death, after the loss of everything they loved and valued, with courage and even with hope. An added bonus for me has been the sharing in a most remarkable parish life, unique in the way it has adapted to the special needs of its parishioners, a few elderly Irish families and hundreds of gay men, most of whom had been alienated from the Church for many years. Picture a beautiful old church, packed to the doors with mostly young men, a vibrant liturgy, glorious music, a fully participating group led by a charismatic pastor, and a really tangible atmosphere of love -- and you have the 10:00 a.m. Sunday Liturgy at Most Holy Redeemer. It has become the preferred parish for my RSCJ community and the warm greetings we exchange with the friends we have made there give support to the belief that "MHR" stands for "Most Hugs Received".