

Preaching love and forgiveness where



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Rosemary Dowd, RSCJ, has served the spiritual needs of prisoners for four decades. She was led to this ministry by her reflection on a quotation from St. John of the Cross, “Where there is no love, put love – and you will find love.” Where else, she asked, is love lacking so much as in a prison? “God seemed to be saying to me, ‘This is where I want you,’” she recalled. “I told the provincial I would do whatever she wanted me to do, but I thought God was asking me to go to jail.” The following is a reflection on her ministry.

there is no love



By Rosemary Dowd, RSCJ

I first encountered the Society of the Sacred Heart when my older sister Patti was a student at Convent of the Sacred Heart, Sheridan Road. I begged to enroll as soon as possible. I loved the school and the nuns and generally looked for ways to “help Mother” after school, as I enjoyed just hanging around. I had a very happy home life, but I also really enjoyed being at Sheridan Road. Gradually, I became aware that God was offering me a vocation to the Society. I read Janet Stuart’s *Life and Letters*, among other books. In my senior year, I made the decision to enter the Society of the Sacred Heart. In my early years in the Society I taught, but I never considered myself a very good teacher. I did love being with the children, especially as surveillante general (dean of students).

When cloister ended in 1964, I was attending the Pastoral Institute at Loyola University of Chicago. We had the opportunity to tour parts of our city I had never seen, including the courts and the projects. It seemed to me that few people cared about people in jail, and I felt a strong attraction to working closely with those people and showing them that some do care, most especially, God.

While I was teaching at the Academy of the Sacred Heart, Woodlands, I began volunteering at Lake County Jail in Waukegan. The Sheriff first asked me to sit in the visiting room in case anyone wanted to come in and talk. I listened. That was it, really. There was always a line, though I was something of an unknown, until the person appeared before me on the other side of the glass. One evening, Holy Thursday, I returned home from my two hours in the jail visiting room and went to sign our *prie dieu* list for adoration. The heading was: “Can’t you spend one hour with Me?” I knew absolutely I had just spent two hours with the Lord in that jail. From that moment – more than forty-three years ago – my desire for this ministry has only intensified, and my gratitude to God and the Society for allowing me to pursue this “second vocation” is boundless.

I have been employed in three jails over the years. I have been at Cook County Jail since 1979, first as a social worker, now as volunteer staff chaplain to 750 medical and psychiatric patients. Even with no paycheck, this is the most wonderful ministry possible. The men are an absolute delight to work with. It is such a joy to be able, at our weekly Communion service, to preach the charism of the Society, the love and forgiveness of our merciful God. It’s the best job I have ever had! Many ask me privately to pray with or for them. Such spontaneous vocal prayer has never been my gift, but I do it and the inmates seem pleased. I often say the Novena of Confidence to the Sacred Heart, and the guys do seem to like that. They are always respectful, courteous and appreciative of the time I spend with them. Some of the men in this jail are on their way to the penitentiary, some for very serious crimes. I don’t want to know what their offenses are; that’s not my role here. Everything I do is aimed at forgiveness, the love and mercy of Jesus Christ.

In my early years in jail I wondered how that ministry fit with my vow of education, which to me means trying to draw out what is within a person. After my experiences as chaplain, I no longer have that question. I do not do this perfectly, but my conscious effort is to help every person I encounter realize the goodness within, no matter how sinful he may be. I want each person to know that God loves and forgives us and will *never* give up on us or abandon us. God’s love will transform us if we are open and willing to be transformed. I think that if a person who did not know before of the transformative power of God’s love learns that lesson in jail, it will have been worth his incarceration. Of course, I would definitely prefer that they learn it elsewhere! While I am called daily to serve in jail, and I go there gladly, I am aware that it is decidedly not a good place to be for those who cannot go home at night. ❖