

PILGRIMS OF HOPE, PARISHES OF HOPE Inspiring personal testimonies of hope. 20 minutes:

Thank you, Bishop Stephen, and the DPC committee to invite me here to share some of my personal experience of hope. Before I begin sharing with you two key experiences of hope in my ministry as Catholic Chaplain at Saskatchewan Penitentiary, I want to present to several images of hope that I often share with the men in my homilies and personal interactions.

The first image is the famous painting based on Rev. 3 :20

²⁰ Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.

In that painting Jesus stands outside the door knocking, waiting for our response to let him in as there is no outside door handle.

So, what happens, when we are so lost within ourselves, that we cannot find the door within our own house to let Jesus in?

When we get so lost in grief, depression, guilt, shame, various addictions, grievous sin, and just overwhelmed by traumatic events in our life, how can Jesus reach us when we cannot or choose not to reach out to him?

As Fr. Jim would say in his homilies, "Hold that image."

The second image is the Gospel scene where the disciples in the upper room after the crucifixion and death of Jesus. The door to the upper room is locked so the Jewish and Roman authority cannot get in to arrest them.

But what happens next, Jesus walks through the doors and appears to them saying, "don't be afraid, peace be with you".

The third image is the well-known poem, "Footprints in the Sand", where Jesus and a person is walking together, the man looks back at the footprints in the sand, to see at dark moments in his life, there is only one set of footprints. So, he asks Jesus, "what gives, I thought you were always with me? Jesus replied, that was the times I carried you.

Bring all three images together, what give me hope in my personal life and in my ministry as deacon and prison chaplain, is the truth that Jesus can walk through the closed doors of our hearts and minds, when we cannot find our way to the open the door to let him in by our own strength.

For me, the best articulation of this theological perspective is found in the writings of the famous Swiss Theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar *Theology of Holy Saturday*, Christ's descent into hell, which has become central to my mission and ministry as a Prison chaplain and now as permanent Deacon.

Holy Saturday stands as the mysterious middle between the cross and resurrection, and consequently properly in the center of all revelation and theology."

Seeing Jesus Christ as a prisoner links Jesus' experience of arrest, trial and sentence and descent into hell to the universal experience of incarcerated men and women. Jesus, during his last moments on the Cross and his descent into hell; and the prisoners, during their incarceration, both experience an inner sense of isolation, estrangement, abandonment, and God-forsakenness.

The key to Christ's descent into hell is his Trinitarian love that frees the sinner in hell from isolation, aloneness and estrangement from God, self, and others. "*Visible presence in love*" is what connects Christ's descent into hell to the mission and ministry of the prison chaplain emphasis on visible presence.

Jesus Christ does not leave us trapped behind the bars of our self-imposed prisons or the inner doors we have lost the ability to open at the sound of him gently knocking.

Jesus Christ is still present to us in those moments when we feel that our will and desire for life or our love for God has left the building.

Like Christ, chaplains stand in vigilant solidarity, "visibly present in love" to many men and women trapped inside the walls and bars of their own inner prison, walls, and bars that only Jesus Christ can penetrate and open!

With this framework and theological foundation of hope, I will now share with you where this has shown up in my ministry as a Chaplain at SKPEN.

First experience of Hope: On Dec. 14, 2016, Sask. Pen. prison riot.

This event happened during the second week of Advent.

I will never forget the scene in the dome area that night. The amount of smoke that came out the last barricade range door once it was opened, the pungent smell of OC spray in the air, the sight of staff dressed in riot gear, carrying shotguns, and some with fire hoses, inmates yelling, the darkness of the winter night, gave me a new insight into the Incarnation of Jesus Christ and my ministry as a prison chaplain.

"In him was life and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it! (John 4-5).

On that dark night with all the unrest, chaos, and violence, as the staff were breaking through the barricaded range doors, we chaplains, and elders were visibly present to both staff and inmates, as God is presence to us, standing beside us in our personal hells, in our broken and deeply wounded world. Jesus was born into such a world so that we may have a new life with God and in the world to come.

The contrast of the Light of Christ and the darkness of men's hearts were very striking for me that night. I am still unpacking the events of that evening. Writing this Chaplaincy Report is helping me to place my own experience of the riot and post-riot transition period into a framework I can understand and use in my Chaplaincy.

Yet, despite this difficult experience, there were still signs of light, hope, and new life. The very next morning after the riot, I have had the graced opportunity of being with an inmate as he was being released from SK PEN.

Walking alongside this young man, whom I have worked with in the chapel for several years, as he made those first steps to leave the prison life behind, praying with him before his family had picked him up, and witnessing his emotional reunion with his Mom, Dad and Sisters made my day.

To see him make it these new steps in his life, to become that man of integrity that he so longs to be and can be with God's help, the assistance of others and his own desire to be a good man.

This type of experience is what makes it all worthwhile, where in that moment and others like it; I catch a glimpse of Jesus Christ, the Risen Prisoner, being present and at work among us. Such encounters remind me why I am a prison chaplain!

Second Example of Hope: which you can find in the Diocese webpage Restorative Justice ministry, the Journey of a feather.

I will now share with you my most profound experience of God's love and mercy, witnessing the transforming impact of restorative justice at work.

On June 26, 2002, two men broke into an elderly woman's Saskatoon home and brutally assaulted her. This elderly woman was a good friend of ours Peter Oliver's mother. My wife and I were staying at our friend's house in Leduc AB when they got the terrible news of what happened to his Mom. One of the attackers cut off her ear. As she lay bleeding on the floor, they stepped over her as they carried the contents of her home out the door. The younger man kicked her as they passed. The incident left in its wake a tremendous amount of fear and pain. Arrests and convictions followed. About two years later the older of the two men was designated a dangerous offender.

Fast forward to 2015, Peter Oliver, our friend, was now working in Saskatoon with Micah Mission, a faith-based organization that promotes restorative justice by reaching out to ex-prisoners and I was now working at Saskatchewan Penitentiary as a Prison Chaplain. Peter called to invite me to participate in a Restorative Opportunities program run by the Correctional Services of Canada where he and his wife, his mom, several members of his family and a CSC facilitator would meet with the man who assaulted his mom.

This was the most powerful experience of restorative justice that I have had experienced. We sat in a circle each one taking turns sharing how this crime affected their life. To witness his sincere apology and his heartfelt request for her forgiveness, and for her Catholic Christian faith in action to grant it. Then to watch them get up from their chairs and walk across the floor to embrace each other with a hug. This is restorative Justice in action! This is the Gospel in concrete reality and in living color!

In the summer of 2022, my friend's mother died. I was able to serve as a deacon at her funeral and did her graveside interment service. The experience of the Restorative Justice Process is a part of their families lived history. Family members spoke about it during the Eulogy, and when my friend Peter gave his reflection shared this RJ experience. After the interment service, the family and friend gathered for a shared meal and refreshments. The letters of the inmate to his mom where shared.

Because I was in previous established relations with my friend Peter, I was able to minister to him not only as a friend but also as a Chaplain during the RJ process and as a Deacon during his mother's funeral and graveside interment. Because the inmate was one of my chapel cleaners, I was able to minister to him while we worked in the chapel but also during the RJ process and during his time in prison.

The impact on the inmate was profound, he was able to ask and receive forgiveness for his crime, reconciled with his victim and her extend family. Not many people in life in general let alone in the prison setting, get this opportunity to reconcile with those whom we have harmed. This RJ experience motivated him to take new steps of healing and growth in his life and end up in positive transfer to another institution. All the while maintaining a relationship with my friend's mom through letter writing.

Summary and Closing words.