



JESUIT RESTORATIVE JUSTICE INITIATIVE

NEWSLETTER | FALL 2022

As we move into the winter months, a number of significant events have taken place in the life of the JRJI Team. After the difficult almost two-year period of COVID shutting down all prison visits, we had once again started up a more regular schedule of retreats to our brothers inside in June. But then the new wave of COVID cases started up, and we were unable to visit prisons during most of July and August.

RETREATS

So, since our last website Newsletter Update in the Spring of 2022, our schedule of retreat visits has included:

- May 2nd: California State Prison-Los Angeles County in Lancaster, CA
- May 10th: Tehachapi State Prison in Tehachapi, CA
- May 31st: Calipatria State Prison in Calipatria, CA
- June 7th: California State Prison-Los Angeles County in Lancaster, CA
- June 14th: Tehachapi State Prison in Tehachapi, CA
- August 2nd: JRJI Planning Day
- September 12th: California State Prison-Los Angeles County in Lancaster, CA
- September 13th: Tehachapi State Prison in Tehachapi, CA
- September 20th: Calipatria State Prison in Calipatria, CA
- October 11th: Tehachapi State Prison in Tehachapi, CA

A number of scheduled retreats not listed above had to be canceled for various reasons, including COVID outbreaks and other unexpected prison conditions. But for the most part, the regular schedule of visits has resumed, and the brothers inside have been exceedingly happy to receive us once again.

Arturo Lopez, JRJI Director of Operations, offers this reflection on recent retreats:

As of September 2022, JRJI has started its retreats, but due to COVID-19, we have had to face many difficulties. So far, programs have had a limited number of participants due to buildings remaining closed and probation officers calling in sick. The limited number of probation officers makes it difficult for participants to participate in the retreats.

During the month of September, we visited three institutions. The last retreat of that month was canceled due to COVID-19. The communities we had an opportunity to visit during the month of September were Lancaster, Tehachapi, and Calipatria. In the last two retreats, we only had 10 participants, when we usually have at least 60 participants in each retreat. (continued on p. 2)

During the month of October, the number of participants increased to 30. We hope that in the upcoming months, the number of participants will continue to increase, but this will all depend on COVID-19 cases.

Despite everything, our visits have not been in vain. We have managed to prepare a plan for future leadership so that in future retreats those teams can help us with the agendas of each retreat. All of this has helped us have a different vision of how important it is to have good leadership teams in each place we visit.

During our visit to Calipatria in October, we had the opportunity to meet with a group of future leaders. We had previously implemented this dynamic before the pandemic happened, but due to COVID-19, we could not continue this. On this occasion, we realized that many of the leaders we had been working with have already reunited with their families. So, for the new leaders, it was a great joy for them to evaluate with us because they now have hope. They can imagine that one day they will also have the same experience of being back with their own families.

One of the new leaders in Calipatria said, "God is with us" when he heard the testimony and the commitment made by another friend. All of that was very moving, knowing that God is very present in those places and that he is drawing life out of death. "God is with us" is the motto of all of us who want to have a new opportunity in life. Not only when it is seen on a personal level, but also when it is seen on a community level, just as we have seen and witnessed in our last visits.

We ask for your prayers so that our ministry continues to give hope to all those communities. They continue to have us in their prayers due to our support, and that's why we call them internal communities or even "Monastic Communities." We feel it is because through their prayers we can find many intercessions and blessings within all the difficulties we have to endure in our world outside of the bars. God bless you always.

Father Mike offers this reflection on JRJI's last visit to Calipatria State Prison:

On Monday, October 17th, on the way to Calipatria State Prison, the trains were not moving in the desert. I counted twelve long, snake-like, winding box cars one after the other. Nothing was moving along the rails as there had been some kind of labor dispute that stopped everything.

On Tuesday, October 18th, when we left the prison, the trains were now moving once again. It was good to have trains trying to race alongside the speed of our car. The moving trains change the stillness of the desert in some strange way. They add some motion to the sun setting on the brown mountains, the long stretches of sand and cacti, and the deep mystery that is the desert. (continued on p. 3)

Monday night, when we arrived at the prison, the sun was setting. It colored the whole sky. It was so different than the reddening of the sky at the ocean. This sunset of the desert was stronger, as if it was so sure of itself. Slowly the darkness settled comfortably around us. The deacon met us at the entrance of the prison at 6pm. We then went inside and met with ten leaders to prepare for the retreat the next day. There was also some time to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

When we left the prison that night, we were once again driving into some kind of strange mystery. At 8:00 pm, the majesty of the desert brought us into a sacred moment of driving along a darkened road on an ordinary Monday. We had just been with some very impressive "modern-day monks" who were determined to do something with their lives, after having spent time walking in the wrong direction in the desert where one can so easily die of thirst. But these men survived, and just being with them inspired us. It spoke to us of Someone Greater.

On Tuesday morning, I awoke to realize that today we would be engaged in a process that required all of our attention and energy. The instant we entered the yard, there was an alarm which meant we needed to step outside. As soon as we got outside, the C.O. told us it was a false alarm, and we could go back inside. And so the day began. Or maybe it was always beginning, and we just jumped into the flow of the process that had been moving for so long.

During the last part of the day, I met someone who had been at San Quentin, but he was sent to this prison for a variety of reasons. There was something about his story that moved me. He spoke of how some of his friends with whom he was with at county jail, who also received death sentences, had been executed during these years. It was chilling to hear his account of how he was convinced he was going to be next. The sadness on his face was powerful. I was moved by his testimony, and although we were only able to speak for twenty minutes, we are going to talk more when we return.

Somehow, the transformation that happened during these last two days at Calipatria was similar to the very mystery, the vastness of this desert, letting us experience these days the infinite expanse of God's Mercy.

It takes you in and does not let you breathe except to notice what is before you. There are the long ups and downs of the road, and the shining of the sun across the Salton Sea. It all brings you into the depth of the mystery of the God of the Desert.

(continued on p. 4)



Picture taken by Arturo Lopez before a retreat at Calipatria State Prison

PARENTS RETREAT

On Sunday, August 21st, Fr. Mike Kennedy, SJ celebrated a mass and led a retreat focusing on the theme of healing for the parents of those incarcerated at St. Albert the Great Catholic Parish.

Ignacio Medina, a former JRJI participant, shares his experience on the retreat: (add his photo?)

I remember when my mother first shared her experiences during a parent meditation circle. I couldn't place her resilience, strength, faith that first time from her words. I didn't know who would be in the circle, or what she would receive from being there.

Those answers came to me this past Sunday.

As we arrived, Fr. Mike greeted us by the door. We all brought food, drinks, and we checked in. Since my mother had built a relationship with your parents, they all followed up with me about my transition since our last meditation. I am now accountable to your parents as well, and I am blessed to have them in my life. Our chairs were set up in a circle, with a table holding a Bible, candles, and our Eucharist for Mass. Once we sat, we all knew how Padre Mike would find a way to make us laugh and put us at ease. I understand this because we all have a common suffering, and we know what we will hear from the circle. In some amazing way, our parents talked about what we inside think they ignore. They know more than we give them credit for. They shared how they raised us, and, for instance, that if they would not have given us everything we asked for, then maybe we would not have gone to prison. They stood up and held a microphone, saying your names and adding something like, "my son has been inside for 30 years", "my son has been there for 25 years", or "my son is in the county jail, and I don't know how I'm going to live with him inside for so long."

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There were tears, and the room was filled with love because everyone there understood their pain and their loss. There were also parents who now had their sons sitting next to them, and they talked about the times they “almost gave up hope” in seeing them come home. This is what my mom shared when she spoke. She still cried, remembering the darkest of moments when I was arrested, sentenced, and denied parole the first time. She said how hopeful she was, and then how crushed she was in receiving the news of my denial. She spoke about staying in bed for days after every one of these moments, not wanting to eat or talk, and even contemplating taking her own life. I listened, and never stopped feeling this great responsibility because I was away for 23 years myself.

To date, it has been 15 months since my release.

Nothing has been certain since my release. Regardless of all the support I garnered inside and out here, I still have to put in the work. Everyone remembered what I said in my letters, and everyone was happy to see me. But I first had to understand the reason I wanted to get out: “I just felt that I could face everything with a different heart.”

Below are pictures of the Parents Retreat:



UPDATE ON DEACON BILL SMITH

We are continuing to keep Deacon Bill Smith in our prayers as he recovers from a severe bicycle accident. Bill is doing well in his recovery, and hopefully, he will soon be back to visit our brothers in prison.

UPCOMING RETREATS

The institutions that we will be visiting in the upcoming months:

- October 18th: Calipatria State Prison in Calipatria, CA
- November 7th: California State Prison-Los Angeles County in Lancaster, CA
- November 15th: Tehachapi State Prison in Tehachapi, CA
- November 22nd: Calipatria State Prison in Calipatria, CA
- December 5th; California State Prison-Los Angeles County in Lancaster, CA
- December 13th: Tehachapi State Prison in Tehachapi, CA
- December 20th: Calipatria State Prison in Calipatria, CA


The next parents meeting will be on Sunday, October 23rd at St. Albert the Great Parish.


LITURGICAL GUIDES


Every week, we send liturgical guides that are used on the JRJI retreats. The liturgical guides are sent via email. If you are interested in receiving the weekly liturgical guides for the upcoming Sundays, you can sign up on our website (www.jrji.org) or by emailing us at info@jrji.org.

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