



# JESUIT RESTORATIVE JUSTICE INITIATIVE

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NEWSLETTER | APRIL 2021

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Even though there are areas in the State of California that are opening up, there are still no volunteer clearances to enter any state prison and this continues to affect our work. We continue to maintain our work by contacting our incarcerated brothers and sisters through the mail by sending books, meditations and letters to our participants on a regular basis.

## TEAM PLANNING SESSION

On April 5th-7th, Fr. Mike, Bobby, Arturo and Deacon Bill gathered together (and Dick Zoomed in for part of it) for a three-day planning session. The meeting focused on what our work would look like once the prisons opened up again for volunteer visits. We discussed what the visitation schedule would look like, and which of the materials we would use that we have been preparing and publishing during these months of the COVID lockdown.

## PRESENTATIONS

On April 13th, Bobby was invited to speak by Zoom to Xavier University students in Cincinnati, OH. The class centered on the social history of incarceration and the meaning of Restorative Justice and it was taught by Jesuit priest Fr. Nathan Wend, SJ. Bobby shared with the students his own experience and how he came to be the Assistant Executive Director of JRJI.

On April 28th, Bobby also spoke via Zoom to high school students at Jesuit High School in Sacramento, CA. The school was sponsoring an education series entitled the "Thea Bowman Justice Education Series", named after the charismatic Roman Catholic religious sister who did so much for ministry with African-Americans in the United States. Sr. Thea once came to Fr. Mike's parish in San Diego, Christ the King, to lead a three-day religious "revival retreat" for the parish there. Bobby's talk to the high school students centered on "Journeys to Restorative Justice".

## JRJI MASS

Since we hope to be able to enter back into the prisons soon, we celebrated and filmed what we think will be our last "Special Mass for Prison Ministry" on April 20th. The theme for this mass was "Mother's Day" and it will be shown in all the prisons up and down California during the week before Mother's Day on May 9. Once again the Mass was filmed in both English and in Spanish, and Bobby shared a reflection in the English mass, and Arturo shared a reflection in the Spanish mass of how this theme has played out in their own lives. Once again, we thank Fr. Eddie Sibert, SJ of Loyola Productions for his expertise in helping us record and edit the Mass for viewing on the CDCR TV channels. His help has been tremendous over these months when we have not been able to personally celebrate mass with the brothers inside.

## PUBLICATIONS

- **Mothers** (2021): This is a book of meditations and reflections on the experience of motherhood, and especially that of Mary to her Son, Jesus, and how that relationship connects with the experiences of mothers whose sons are incarcerated, just as Jesus was. It will soon be at the printers for publication in late May.
- **Oraciones en Tiempos de COVID** (2021) This is the Spanish translation of Fr. Mike's book "Prayers in the Time of COVID" which we mentioned in last month's newsletter.
- **Hope** (2021): This will be the theme of the next book of Fr. Mike's meditations and is in the process of being edited at present.

## UPCOMING RETREATS

The JRJI Team is planning an overnight retreat for JRJI "Alumni" who have been released and who still keep in contact with us. The retreat will be held on May 14th-15th at a house right on the beach and at present, there are at least ten retreatants signed up to attend.

JRJI is also planning a retreat for parents of JRJI participants who are still inside. This one-day retreat will be held at St. Albert the Great Parish on Sunday, June 6th. Fr. Mike will be celebrating mass for this group at 11:00 am and everyone is invited.

## WISDOM FROM THE CELLS

As another example of the ongoing inner work of our brothers inside, we once again share some "Wisdom from the Cells" this month from Victor and Angel who responded to some of the reflection questions from JRJI reflection materials. First from Victor:

**No one is there to help Jesus. I remember a time when I felt helpless...  
I remember... I remember...**

*Being in a cell... I wanted to brighten my day and hear about the family so I called my dad only to hear that my dad lost his job. My younger brother hadn't been home in a couple of days and my grandma was really sick. I could only say so much. I can't act on it. When we were done talking, a huge sense of helplessness hit me and anger as well. I knew that I could have changed the conditions out there by helping my family out. But instead I'm in a cell. I pray and always prayed and fortunately my family is doing good. They surpassed without me and I thank God for that. I'm helpless and they are still there for me.*

**Jesus' power lies in his silence and resistance of Herod.  
I remember a time I resisted a fight. I remember... I remember...**

*I honestly resist a fight every single day. I get this urge to just assault somebody, some because they act like they can't be touched, some because of the reason that they're in jail, and others for the reasons that I have. But thank God that I have faith and I just don't act wild. I discipline myself the way Jesus teaches us. I'm not perfect but the point is that I put it into practice every single day and that is what puts me sane and at peace with myself.*

*I remember the last time I saw my mother... I remember... I remember...*

*It was on September 29th. My mom came with my sister and my niece. I was so happy to see them because the next day I was going to get transferred. I knew I wasn't going to see them for a while after being transferred. We talked and I told her not to worry about me. I know that she holds so much in, because I could see it in her eyes and as much as it hurts me, I always try to put a smile on her face. She knows that I love her with all my heart, and I'm doing the best to go home and be with her again and I thank God that he gave me another opportunity.*

**And from Angel:**

***I remember a moment that I am grateful for... I remember...I remember...***

*A moment that I'm grateful for is when I was a kid of about 8 or 9 years old. It was a time when all of my family was together. I remember the best times for me were when my sisters and brother were still in the same household. My mother was happy and always gave us love and made things fun at home. We were a close-knit family and could always depend on one another and could go to each other to talk, get support. I am grateful of those times because that is when the family was the happiest. Today, the family is separated and I do not have a relationship with my brother or sisters. My mom is out there on her own. I feel like when I got locked up the family parted and nothing was ever the same. I truly am appreciative of all the good memories. I pray that when I am released I am able to reunite my family again and share new fun and loving memories. I love my family and I am really grateful for them and all the love that they gave me growing up and the love I still receive from them today. I thank God for blessing me with life, health, the understanding after all these years to see what truly matters in life and that is family, friends, and myself. I'm thankful for my life and everything I have in it.*

## **FOOTPRINTS PROGRAMS**

The JRJI Footprints Program, started by Bobby Garcia, helps participants to examine a wide variety of testimonies and exercises that have influenced a change of character and rehabilitation. The participants analyze the contributions made by themselves and others that have fostered healing and compassion. Below is an example of a reflection by Jose:

***Footprints Essay (April 2021)***

*My name is Jose. I am an inmate in the California Prison System, I am 42 years old, I have been in for over 24 years straight. I came in when I was a juvenile at 17. I just turned 42 today. Yes, today is my birthday, and I wanted to do something special. I decided to write this today.*

*When I came in, I was a young teen, and as a teen in California, the gang culture is strong. Still, it's 100 times stronger in custody. It is so strong that you are categorized in a gang culture at your very first committee (where prison officials determine your custody level, privilege group, and inmate status). I remember I received a SHU (Security Housing Unit) custody level - a term based on gang activities committed in the reception center. I was placed in Administrative Segregation (AD-SEG) pending a committee review. When I went to my committee hearing, I was asked whether I was a gang member or not. I had to lie to the officials because gang culture states not to self-identify to be placed in a location to have access to gang rivals to assault. I told the committee, "I do not know anything about prison. I am Mexican and not from a gang." Committee members looked at each other perplexed by my statement. They had dealt with these situations many times before and were not surprised. They asked me what county I was from, and I stated, "Riverside." A committee member stated, "You don't know what you are? Obviously, you are a southerner, a Sureño." So I was labeled a Southern Mexican.*

*Once placed in this category, I was thrown into the ocean of the prison system. I moved in that rough current for 23 years. After 23 years, I began a personal growth journey because the prison system never offered anything. In 2012, the prison system flipped upside down and inside out. In 2013 there was finally some light that helped juveniles who had a sentence of life without parole to be let out. I finally had hope. Although I had many years, and multiple sentences to serve, I had a chance. We all now had a chance in here.*

*I was 17 when the judge told me I would die in prison. We were conditioned to believe that we would die in prison. Judges, district attorneys, correctional officers, inmates, cellmates, and every committee member reinforced that belief - we would die in prison.*

*Senate Bill 260 came around in 2014. This new bill now tells me that they were wrong! I am now more than what crimes I committed. I can change and I have a second chance. Since 2012 rehabilitation in the California prison system has been growing and growing. Now there are more classes, self-help programs, vocations, and privileges to enjoy for good behavior. Ever explicit is the present knowledge that I wasn't born with a gun in my hand, and my life unraveled because of many poor choices I made. To change wasn't going to be easy. It was going to be a clean-up of so many resentments, anger, pain, and hopelessness.*

*I served 23 years in the most dangerous and violent prisons California had to offer. I proved to myself that I could hang in there for about two decades before making the sweeping changes in my life.*

*Now I have made a serious commitment to change:*

*I had to put my words into action  
I had to prove it to myself  
I had to prove it to my victim's family  
I had to prove it to the world*


*My change is real, and I will continue changing for the better,  
to make up for the harm I have committed to this world.*

## 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](http://www.jrji.org)) or by emailing us at [info@jrji.org](mailto:info@jrji.org).

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