



JESUIT RESTORATIVE JUSTICE INITIATIVE

NEWSLETTER | JUNE 2021

The prisons in California are slowly opening up to outside visitors. JRJI is presently planning the schedule of our future visits, beginning with visiting the California State Prison-Los Angeles County in Lancaster on Monday, June 28th. Our next newsletter will give an update on how this visit went after a year and a half of not being able to go inside. We continue to communicate to JRJI participants by sending them monthly reflection materials and through ongoing correspondence with many of the men in different prisons up and down the state.

PARENT RETREAT

On Sunday, June 6, 2021, JRJI held a retreat for parents of both presently and formerly incarcerated individuals. Here is part of Fr. Mike Kennedy's letter reflecting on that day which he sent to JRJI participants who are still inside:

In Los Angeles, we are experiencing what everyone calls "June Gloom". This means that every day when you wake up, it is overcast, and the sun does not come out until the afternoon. Then it clouds up again. June Gloom is a sign that summer is here. Every once in a while, when the sun comes up, you know that you're in a different season. Everything looks different. Today, we had a Mass with the parents of some of you. We celebrated at St. Albert's Church in Compton. There were at least 25 people, who for many years have been coming to the parents' meetings. But because of Covid, we haven't seen each other for a year and a half. It was like an experience of having the sun break out after so much of June Gloom. There was no June Gloom in our parents' meeting. The level of sharing was very deep. Parents were talking about their sons, and talking about what it was like for them to have been locked up in their houses during Covid. There was a feeling of great joy around the circle after not being able to see each other for a year and a half. There was a great sense of connectedness, happiness, and real friendship that had built up in this community of parents during these years.



Fr. Mike blessing the parents at the Parents' Retreat.

Likewise, Assistant Executive Director Bobby Garcia also wrote a moving letter to JRJI participants inside about the Parents' Retreat. His unique perspective, as someone who has shared what the men inside are experiencing, gives added hope, depth, and meaning to his words:

I awoke this Sunday, June 6, 2021, at approximately 5:00 am, thinking about Fr. Mike's upcoming Mass at St. Albert the Great. Today was going to be a special day because many formerly incarcerated and families of those incarcerated would be there to participate in the Mass, and in the Family Retreat in the afternoon. I read over the folleto. The first reading was from Exodus. Wow, I had read these same verses when I told myself I would do my best to walk the walk that God had set out for us in his Commandments. Just like the people in the bible, I too said I would do everything that the Lord has told us. So just as Jesus saved me from the dark places of incarceration, and gave me a second chance at life, I said I would do my best to encourage those who would be in attendance today to see that Jesus is a miracle worker! The Mass was crowded. Many people were intent on hearing Fr. Mike's words, as well as the words from a woman and her husband who shared about healing and forgiveness. Healing and forgiveness would echo in the minds of everyone there, and also at the retreat later that day. As each person spoke, I could see the happiness they felt at seeing the miracles God has provided with the release of so many men. I could also see the pain of those who still had loved ones in prison. As each person spoke, I felt God's presence more and more. Compassion was in the air. I thought back to all the men and women that we haven't seen in prison for such a long time - those whom we would visit and share time with. Why haven't they come out? Why are they still there? I don't know the answers, because I am not God, but I do know their time will come. When the prisons open back up, JRJI will be there once again, sharing the love and the testimonies from those who were once inside. Why are some men and women eligible to parole faster than others? Why is there this disparity? Why are the lower levels entitled to so much more programing, when those in dark higher security places don't have as much? I reflect on when God created light when the universe began. Remember? God also created the earth and the heavens. In prison, I learned that, although it can be dark, there is a lot of light in the eyes of so many who are imprisoned. While in prison, I thought the dark meant God wasn't present there. In the end, I knew he was the Beacon of Light to follow, so I too could be lit and pass the torch of light around.

FOOTPRINTS PROGRAM UPDATE FROM BOBBY GARCIA

Bobby shares this reflection from one of the Footprints participants, Ignacio Medina, who was recently released from prison:

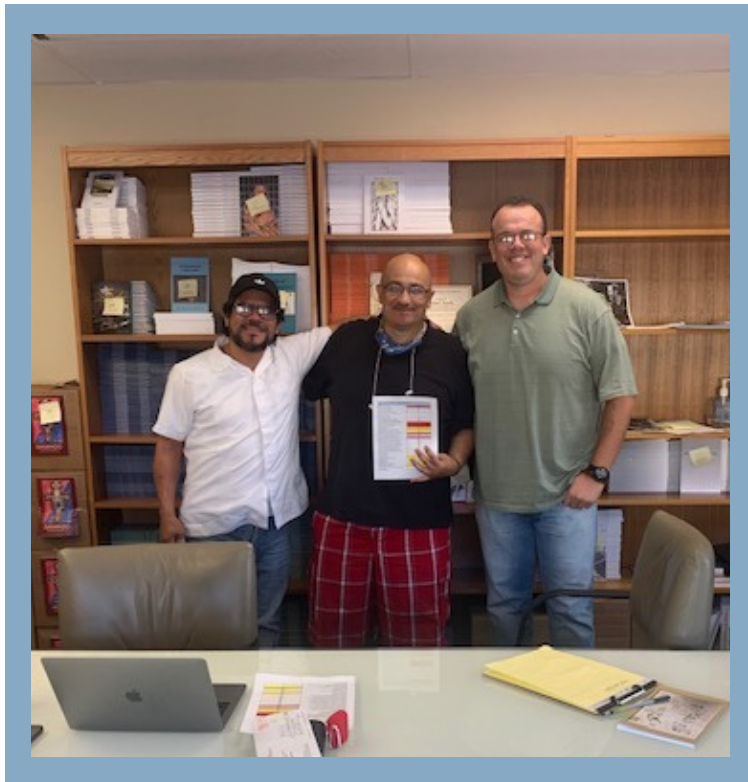
I'm Ignacio Medina Jr. Released after twenty-three years in prison. Today is the forty-fifth day out, yes I'm counting. The thing is I love everything that this second chance has granted me, from the colors on every flower to the exhaust from the cars that drive so close to me as I wait on street corners. The blessing is every opportunity, and the life I'm living for the difference I believe in making once I rejoined the free society. Forgiving was a long time coming, and once my heart accepted the serenity GOD had for me the colors kicked in. I was hard on myself for taking a man's life, and I remember how much I accepted negative situations as some deep emotional rationalization of paying my dues for the crime I'd committed. These situations almost cause me to lose my life on several occasions, and for that I needed forgiveness.

I accepted the facts of why I was spared from leaving this world without doing my part to aid society from the crimes that cause so much pain and heartache. I first had to value GOD in all his grace. That was so far away from his words that I had accepted my fate dying in some prison yard when all alone he was preparing me for this here today, the opportunity to reach out to those that struggle to find their true meaning to life. Now, as I write this, I take myself back to a prison cell. I do this because of the many women and men that are an inspiration to me by the FAITH they have in reaching a place here with me. Smiling just now, I sit in the very office my mail was read by Father Mike. On day one, I was offered an internship with him, and I'm so very humbled that in some way the effort I put forth was considered in this chance I'm being granted to make amends to the very people I once hurt with my actions.

The highlight of working here with the team at J.R.J.I is the work it takes to reach back inside. I remember how I sometimes thought people had forgotten me, sometimes because the letters I wrote took so long for any response. Now I get the effort all this takes to keep going, and how much people care about us. Furthermore are the supporters of the work done here. I can attest to the difference made by the team here in their ability to reach inside to us. I'm a testament to that very thing because my past was dark and the light came through literature shared by J.R.J.I.

If it were not for Father Mike, walking the tiers praying for us, and telling us how much we mattered to so many people, I would be physically sitting in a cell today.

Thank you, GOD, for sparing me, and every step is with you in my heart purposely doing what is in your plans for me.



Adolfo Real (middle) and Ignacio Medina (right) came to the JRJI Office to help out. Here they are with Arturo (left).

CORRESPONDENCE UPDATE BY ARTURO LOPEZ

After some evaluation and planning with the JRJI team, we are trying to restructure the future of our ministry in the prisons. Due to the new restrictions and recommendations of CDCR regarding COVID precautions for volunteers, we have decided to re-start our retreats in September 2021 in Lancaster, followed by Tehachapi, Ironwood, and Calipatria.

For the next few months, however, we will continue with our correspondence program, which has been very beneficial for the sisters and brothers in prison during this time of the pandemic. They have responded quite well with their personal reflections regarding their own forgiveness and healing process. We will continue to share these reflections with you, which we call "Wisdom from the Cells", so that you can share them in your communities.

We also thank you for all your prayers that benefit the entire JRJI ministry. You will always be in our prayers.



Bobby, Adolfo, Ignacio and Fr. Mike

ADVOCACY

JRJI is supporting Assembly Bill (AB) 292 introduced by State Senator Mark Stone. In describing the bill, Sen. Stone's office states:

AB 292 will limit disruptions to rehabilitative programming as much as possible by requiring that programming continues during lock downs and directs CDCR to develop and implement programming that is not solely based on in-person methods. AB 292 will also delay non-adverse, non-disciplinary transfers until the individual has completed their current programming. In cases where transfers are not preventable, CDCR will be required to seek volunteers, and to ensure that people have access to programming in the new facility. AB 292 will also address the unequal access to the higher credit-earning rate associated with Fire Camp participation by requiring CDCR to offer the same increased credit-earning potential for in-prison programming. Further, AB 292 will reduce delays to programming due to frequent lockdowns and program cancellations. This provides equal protection, equal justice, and equal opportunity to access the benefits of programming for disabled people and people who are elderly or otherwise unsuited to the demands of Fire Camp duty.

SUMMER VOLUNTEER

Mr. Nicholas Russell, SJ, a Jesuit student studying Philosophy at Loyola University in Chicago, has joined the JRJI team for the months of June, July and August. Nick has had previous experiences with JRJI when he was living as a Jesuit Novice at the Jesuit Novitiate in Culver City, CA, and the JRJI team is very glad to welcome Nick back for these months.

PUBLICATIONS

- Final manuscripts for the books ***Mothers*** (2021), ***Hope*** (2021), and ***Oraciones Durante El Tiempo de Covid*** (Prayers in the Time of Covid) (2021) have been sent to Mr. Mike Roide and will soon be printed for use inside.
- Fr Mike's next book of meditations is in the planning stages at present and will be centered around the theme of Redemption.

WISDOM FROM THE CELLS

Once again, we are offering some profound reflections and wisdom from our brothers who have responded in writing to JRJI reflection materials. We thank them for sharing with us important aspects of their personal journeys:

Jose

The emotions that formed my island are fear, confusion, resentment, and anger. The emotion that drives me to beautify my landscape is love. I learned to love and respect myself and this changed everything. I am able to take things slow and figure out positive solutions to my issues. I have thus eliminated many, if not all, issues that plagued me. I have learned that our experiences make us, and that negative can become positive. It is a process, but one worthwhile for the sake of peace and tranquility and happiness.

Samir

I am too tired. I just want some peace. I don't want any material things; I just want to live with God. I want to be left for His care. I do see some people here who are carefree, and I envy them for it. I wonder how it is that they are able to live in such peace and in such a horrible and ugly place like this. Then I realize that God is the answer. All I have to do is trust in Him to help me on my journey in life. All I have to do is put my best efforts forward, and work for the good of people and the good of myself. I take on life's challenges one day at a time, and I trust in him to give me that which I deserve.

Eugene

God has been with me, even when I was at my worst, comforting me, giving me strength, waiting for me. I just didn't see it. Jesus really has been with me all of these years. I just didn't see Him. Or, better yet, I wasn't looking for him. He never gave up on me, and that is a beautiful thing.

UPCOMING EVENTS

In the next few weeks, JRJI will be visiting some of the prisons for Fr. Mike to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession) with anyone who would like to do so. We will also be meeting one-on-one with JRJI participant leaders to plan and coordinate our future retreats.

- June 28, 2021 - California State Prison at Lancaster
- July 8, 2021 - Valley State Prison at Chowchilla
- July 20, 2021 - California Correctional Institute at Tehachapi




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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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