

EASTER AT COLEMAN

Our Easter Vigil service on Saturday had to be cancelled because our pastor had a scheduling conflict. He had to supervise a Passover service instead.

Our parish is not your typical parish. Our parish is located within a low security federal correctional institute in Coleman, Florida. Our pastor, in addition to saying mass for us every Sunday is also a full time employee of the Federal Bureau of Prisons as a chaplain in a near by penitentiary, thus the scheduling conflict between our Easter Vigil Mass and his other chaplaincy duties. Although we did not have an Easter Vigil Mass, we did have a beautiful Mass of the Resurrection on Easter Day.

The Federal Correctional Institute (FCI) in Coleman is home to about 1900 men who I prefer to call residents rather than inmates. Residents are here for a wide range of crimes ranging from white collar crimes, to the sale or importation of illegal drugs to child pornography and child molestation. I am a resident here for failure to pay federal taxes.

I am a very involved member of the Catholic Church. I was all of my life, so it was natural that I would be so here at FCI Coleman. During the last nine months, I had the honor to prepare six men for the reception of the sacraments. Two of those men would be baptized and a third would be received into the Church. The remaining three men were to be confirmed. While two of the Confirmation candidates were transferred to another institution before Easter, the remaining four candidates were ready and eagerly looking forward to Easter and their reception of the sacraments.

It is said that men often find religion in prison and from what I have observed this is sometimes true, especially with faith groups that have an easy entrance policy. Becoming a Catholic here is no different than it is in the outside world. All of the candidates had to attend weekly RCIA classes for 6 to 9 months and take a short course in the Gospels. The candidates had to make a commitment to learn the fundamentals of the faith and what it truly meant to be a practicing Catholic.

How these men began their faith journey was truly the work of the Holy Spirit. Almost a year ago, I started RCIA classes with the three men who wanted to receive Confirmation. A month after the classes began, I changed rooms where I slept. Shortly after my arrival in my new quarters, I was approached by one of my new roommates, a middle aged man named Rob, who just walked up to me and asked how he could become a Catholic. I assured him that together we could make that happen. He joined my RCIA group.

Rob shared with me that his wife, a native of Ireland, and his three children are practicing Catholics and his children attended Catholic schools. He had long since realized that he had been missing out on something very special by not being able to fully participate in mass and the religious life of his family, now he wanted to change that. This Easter his family made a special trip to visit Rob to rejoice with him now that he has become Catholic.

My next candidate Tom, was an easy catch. I had often noticed Tom sitting in the back of the chapel during Sunday mass and I knew he wasn't Catholic, so I went up to him one day and asked if he wanted to become Catholic. Tom replied that he had been thinking about it for a while, so I invited him to join my RCIA class, for him just to see what it was all about. He soon committed to his faith journey and to the Church.

Soon after Floyd arrived at Coleman, he would sometimes sit at my table in the dining room during meals. After the third or fourth time, I just blurted out the question "Have you ever considered becoming Catholic?"

To my absolute surprise he answered yes and joined my RCIA group.

There it was, three invitations and three acceptance. I felt that the Holy Spirit was truly at work.

We had almost 60 residents for our Easter Mass. In order to make the mass as inclusive as possible, two of our hymns would be sung in Spanish and the second reading would be read in Spanish. Some of the prayers during the mass would be done in both Spanish and English.

At Easter Mass our Pastor preached a great homily. As is his style he kept the homily to under ten minutes and eloquently focused on Christ's message, challenging us to live that message in our everyday lives here at Coleman and beyond. Finally he challenged us to be able to pray to God "Thy will be done".

Now we would soon be at the part of the mass that I was especially looking forward to, the candidates big moment. First Floyd and Rob received the Sacrament of Baptism, then Tom was received into the Church. Next, all four men received the Sacrament of Confirmation. I was as proud of them as I could be. This was my second Easter at Coleman and the second time here that I was able to prepare men to be received into the Church. Last year I had two men become Catholic. I was especially glad that I was able to do this work with these men as this would be my last Easter of incarceration. Being an active member of our Catholic Community and working with these men to become Catholic, made me feel as if my incarceration was not in vain.

At communion, I had the four candidates at the front of the communion line, followed by the other sponsor and then myself. When it came to be my turn to receive communion, I took it as I always did and returned to my seat to make my thanksgiving, then the most extraordinary event happened to me.

As I knelt down to pray the host on my tongue seemingly burst forth in my mouth and my whole body, yes every part of me was over taken with a sense of overwhelming joy, euphoria if you will, which brought to me uncontrollable tears of joy.

Now, if there is one thing I am not, that is a man who is prone to tears, but right then and there, tears of joy were streaming down my cheeks.

At first I did not understand what was happening, but within seconds it became abundantly clear that I was experiencing the Holy Spirit. This was my theophany.

The joy was at a magnitude which I had never experienced before. It was pure, it was satisfying, it was all encompassing, it was like nothing I had ever experienced in my 59 years. I was in ecstasy.

The joy would give way to an enveloping sense of peace, that peace which the world can not give.

Within a couple of minutes it was over, but it will never be forgotten. As this most powerful experience left me, I felt both giddy from the experience and at the same time exhausted, as if I just completed a extensive workout. There was absolutely no doubt in my mind that I just had a very special and real experience with God and was touched by the Holy Spirit.

When I got back to my housing unit, I wrote an email (Yes in federal prison we have email) to my friends and family sharing with them what just happened to me. The next day, Easter Monday, I started to write about what happened in my journal, then I was inspired to write an article about my experience and try to have it published. Although I never tried having an article published before, I knew I had to do this, my story had to be told. It was God's will that I do so.

While we have all read in recent years about the unfortunate incidents which have occurred within our Church, I firmly believe that we have to write more about all of the good which takes place within the Church as well. We have to share with others those modern day miracles, large and small which take place everyday in the world around us.

Here in prison, these men wanted to become Catholic. Not because it was the popular religion here, it certainly is not, not because it was easy, becoming Catholic was not that either, they chose to become Catholic because of faith and belief in Jesus and in His Church. They realized there was no substitute to what can be encountered at mass. They were called to the faith and they were willing to make the commitment.

Even in prison God reaches out to us with the gifts of faith, courage, healing and hope. God answered my prayers when I asked Him, how would I be able to serve you while I am here? How can I to be fruitful for you in this environment? The answer was given to me, in the most obvious of ways.

I am reminded of the Judgement of Nations passage in the Gospel of St. Matthew, chapter 25. This is where Jesus extolls us to visit those in prison. It seems that the Holy Spirit has been busy visiting us in a very real way here at FCI Coleman. Even better, we have been listening to him, when he spoke.

Patrick Crowe
Patrickcrowe10@gmail.com
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