

## The Sacrament

By Shon Pernice

I had coasted in the Missouri prison system for seven years. The only admission to my crime was at sentencing, as part of the plea agreement. Otherwise, the crime was not my fault. I blamed my victim, justified my wrongful actions, and minimized a horrible transgression. I was numb inside: a hollow being. I did not care about anyone else but my reputation. Denial was so much easier to hide my shame and regret. I was in a dark place, and lost in a world with no hope.

I had grown up in a Catholic family and attended parochial schools until I reached the eighth grade. While attending public schools I began to distance myself from the church. Inside prison, I attended Catholic services because that is what I knew, and am more comfortable with. Our Sunday services are normally led by a Deacon from an outside parish. We may get lucky, a few times a year, and have a priest lead the services. The local Diocese stepped in and sponsored a Catholic banquet for us on December 12, 2017. This was a pivotal moment in my life, my spirituality, and my rehabilitation.

The banquet was held in the prison's visitation room. Tables were set up, outside guests arrived, and the sweet aroma of outside food filled the air. Most of the outside guests were volunteers from a local church that assist in our Sunday services. Two priests arrived. Just observing these men of the cloth on this side of the fence brought both fear, and comfort. This is a medium security prison and the men get complacent in gestures and speech. However, for some mysterious reason, nobody wants to slip up in front of priest. We are on our best behavior.

After our meal was blessed and ample conversation during the meal, the two priests set up areas, on opposite sides of the room, to offer confession. I had not been to confession in at least 25 years and did not look in the direction to where the sacraments were being offered. If I did venture over there, what sins should I confess to? Certainly not the one that I am in prison for. What would the priest think of me? I was physically trembling at the thought of sitting before the man that represented God and confessing the mortal sin that was caused by my hand. It felt like the preemptive Judgment Day.

A staff member sitting next to me said, "Shon, Father Pardee has an empty seat over there. You should go". Now, a staff member that I respect had just set me out. I have a choice: prison mentality and continue eating, or face my sinister past that I have denied for the past

seven years? I take a deep breath, one of those massive inhalations that fill the lungs and give you added courage. I take each step with careful precision. It was like stepping into the ocean for the first time and unsure of what is going to greet you. I sat cautiously in the plastic orange chair before the padre. He smiles as I struggled for the words that I once knew many years ago: “Forgive me Father for I have sinned. It has been over twenty years since my last confession”. Expecting a reaction of surprise or condemnation-nothing. I considered spouting out some common sins just to go through the motions of confession: foul language, lies, adultery, pornography, theft, and impure thoughts. Too easy, I can do this. On the other hand, do I want to tell of the big one? I decide to jump right into the deep water of the pool of my sins. I’m not sure if this was due to fear, being impatient and just wanting to get it over with, or was this a Divine push?

As I told my sin, this was the first time of a genuine confession of guilt, the first time without justification, minimizing, or blaming—that I killed my wife. I watched Father Pardee’s face, his eyes, and his hands with the eyes of an eagle. I expected a look of disappointment, a grimace, or some uneasiness sitting three feet in front of a murderer with no barrier between us. I only saw love on his face. I felt an unconditional love emitting from him. Up to that point in my life, I had never felt love like that: agape love. Father Pardee said a prayer and declared me absolved of my sin. I wept. In a prison visitation room, surrounded by inmates that I will see in general population the next day, the emotional levy that withheld so much guilt and pain was now broken. I felt a rebirth as the dark spot on my soul was now gone. My path in the prison system changed at that very moment and the priest that brought spiritual relief into my life I will never forget.

Father Pardee passed away in 2019 from cancer. His death was announced at our Catholic banquet that December. I write this story to inspire other clergy of the importance of the sacraments in the prison setting. But, also as a living tribute to Father Pardee and the impact that he had on my life. Amen.