

Pope highlights prisoners' unique 'Way of the Cross' on Good Friday



ROME - From the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak, prisoners have emerged in Pope Francis's daily prayers and Mass intentions. On Good Friday, with many around the world confined to their homes, prisoners will offer a glimpse into their own permanent quarantine during the Vatican's *Via Crucis* prayer.

Each year Pope Francis tasks a different person or group with writing meditations for his Way of the Cross prayer on Good Friday, the day on which Christians commemorate Jesus's crucifixion and death.

This year, the meditations were organized by the chaplaincy of the "Due Palazzi" House of Detention in Padua, Italy. Authors include prisoners, family members of prisoners, a catechist, a civil magistrate, volunteers

and a priest who was falsely accused of an unspecified crime and later acquitted. The Vatican [published the full text of the meditations earlier in the week.](#)

In an April 10 letter thanking the prisoners for their meditations, Pope Francis said he “took residence in the folds of your words and I felt welcomed at home. Thanks for sharing a piece of your story.”

Written in the first-person, each offers a personal story recounting resentment, anger, guilt, despair and regret, as well as hope, faith and mercy.

Reflecting on Jesus’s condemnation to death, one prisoner condemned alongside his father to a life sentence said that to date, “The harshest condemnation remains that of my own conscience: at night I open my eyes and I desperately search for a light that will shine upon my story.”

“Strange to say, prison was my salvation,” he said, adding that many times he feels like Barabbas - the criminal freed while Jesus was condemned. If others see him that way too, “that does not make me angry,” the prisoner said.

“I know in my heart that the Innocent One, condemned like me, came to find me in prison to teach me about life,” he wrote.

A prisoner charged with murder wrote about Jesus’s first fall while carrying the cross, saying when he fell and took someone’s life, “for me that fall was death.” Recalling an unhappy childhood that led him to anger and resentment, the prisoner said he didn’t realize that “evil was slowly growing inside me.”

“My first fall was failing to realize that goodness exists in this world,” he said. “My second, the murder, was really its consequence.”

Two parents whose daughter was murdered spoke of the living hell they

have experienced since their daughter's death, which not even justice has cured. However, when despair seems to take over "the Lord in different ways comes to meet us," they said, adding that "The commandment to perform acts of charity is for us a kind of salvation: we do not want to surrender to evil"

"God's love is truly capable of renewing life because, before us, his Son Jesus underwent human suffering so as to experience true compassion."

Reflecting on the compassion shown by Simon of Cyrene, who helped Jesus to carry his cross, another prisoner said this is seen daily in unexpected places, not only by the volunteers who come to help prisoners, but also by his cellmate.

"His only wealth was a box of candies. He has a sweet tooth, but he insisted that I bring it to my wife the first time she visited me: she burst into tears at that unexpected and thoughtful gesture," the man said, adding, "I dream that one day, I will be able to trust others. To become a Cyrenean, bringing joy to someone."

Another prisoner who ended up dragging his whole family into prison after peddling drugs led to a series of tragic events said that "in those years I didn't know what I was doing. Now that I know, I am trying to rebuild my life with the help of God."

A prisoner writing about Jesus's third fall recalled the many times that children fall down when learning to walk. "I am coming to think that these are preparations for all the times when we will fall as adults," he said, noting that inside prison, "the worst form of despair is to think that life no longer has meaning."

"It is the greatest suffering: of all the lonely people in the world, you feel like the loneliest," he said, and mused on the day when he hopes to meet his granddaughter outside of prison and tell her of the good he found

while there, not the evil done.

The mother of a prisoner reflected on the moment when Jesus meets his own mother, Mary, saying that after her son's sentence, "Not for a moment" was she tempted to abandon him.

"I feel Mother Mary close to me: she helps me not to give into despair and to cope with the pain," she said. "I beg for the mercy that only a mother is able to experience, so that my son can return to life after having paid for his crime."

A catechist reflecting on when Veronica wiped Jesus's face said that as someone who works with prisoners daily, "I wipe away many tears, letting them flow: they flood uncontrollably from hearts that are broken."

"Their tears are those of defeat and loneliness, of remorse and lack of understanding. I often imagine Jesus here in prison in my stead: how would he wipe away the tears?" the catechist asked, saying Christ's answer to them has always been "to contemplate, without fear, those faces marred by suffering."

A prison teacher, writing about Jesus being stripped of his clothing, noted that when people first come to prison, they too are stripped of many things, and are "helpless, frustrated by their weakness, frequently deprived of even the ability to understand the wrong they have done."

Writing about Jesus being nailed to the cross, a priest who was falsely accused of a crime and spent 10 years in prison before being acquitted after a retrial said he often re-read the Gospel passages of Jesus's crucifixion and death.

Like Jesus, "I realized that I was a guiltless man forced to prove his innocence," he said, noting that on the day he was finally acquitted, "I found myself happier than I had been ten years before: I experienced

first-hand God working in my life. Hanging on the cross, I discovered the meaning of my priesthood."

Speaking of the balance between justice and hope, a civil magistrate writing about Jesus dying on the cross said he hands out sentences, but true justice "is possible only through a mercy that does not crucify an individual forever, but becomes a guide in helping him to get up and to realize the goodness that, for all the wrong he has done, is never completely extinguished in his heart."

"It is not easy to be faced with someone who yielded to evil and inflicted immense harm on others and their lives. In prison, an attitude of indifference can create even further harm in the history of someone who has failed and is paying his debt to justice," wrote a corrections officer, saying each person can change, but they must do it on their own time and this time must be respected.

A religious brother who volunteers at a prison said he is grateful for the ministry. "We Christians frequently fall into the illusion of feeling that we are better than others," he said, noting that Jesus spent his life among prostitutes, thieves and lepers.

"Even within the worst of persons, he is always there, however obscured is their memory of him," the volunteer said. "I just need to halt my hectic pace, stop in silence before those faces marred by evil and listen to them with mercy."

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A smartphone is placed on a dark desk, displaying the CRUX website. The website shows a news article with a photo of people and a section titled 'PANDEMIC:'. The phone is next to a red spiral notebook and a black pen. In the background, a portion of a black keyboard is visible.

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