

ADEODATUS



Augustinian Defenders
of the Rights of the Poor

Augustinian Province of St. Thomas of Villanova



VOICES FROM PRISON AND THE EDGE

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**“We are not human beings having a
spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings
having a human experience,”**

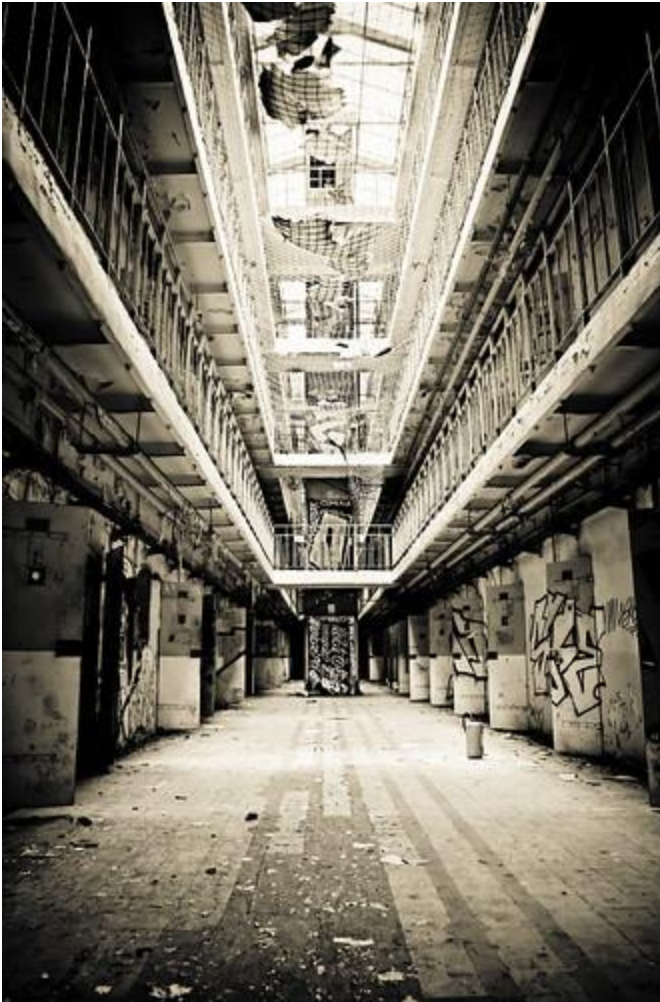
Pierre Teilhard de Chardin



“The peace I’ve experienced hearing confessions in prison”

Paul Morrissey, *America* August 11, 2023

When he pulls back from the table, it is wet from his tears. It isn’t like he is sobbing. The tears just fall silently. Salvo, the name of this 30-something man who signed up for confession at the prison where I serve as a chaplain, kept on speaking. I wasn’t sure whether he was talking to God or to me. I just nodded. Moments earlier, my hands were placed over his, which were in handcuffs, before he held them in front of his face to pray, half in English, half in Spanish. The two of us, he in his orange jumpsuit and me in my black clerical shirt and trousers, sat next to each other at one of the hexagonal metal tables in the middle of the cell block, visible to other inmates in the tiers above and below us. Some of them peered out of the small plastic windows on their cell doors. The guard who brought Salvo down from “the Hole” 15 minutes earlier, after shackling his hands and feet with chains, glanced up from his desk about 10 yards away from us as I placed my hands back on the table. I was aware of how intimate this praying looked. I didn’t mind. The tears said it all, to God if not to anyone else. Today was a day of tears. Unusual for the men in prison, most of whom have to keep up a tough front. Often, they keep this stance with me too, even when in private, let alone when I meet them on the cell block instead of my office, as I have to meet those who are in protective custody. I believe if they can find one space to weep and be real with another person and before God, it will lead to their peace of mind and ability to be strong. I wait for them to pull themselves together before they go back to their cells. I bow my head, feeling the calloused hands of a tough guy who would ordinarily never be resting his hands in another’s so vulnerably. The whole dynamic of hearing confessions in prison is incredible. Quite a few guys have told me that they believe God got them into prison to save them from heading in the wrong direction. I use this awesome role of confessor to encourage them to foster this spark of God’s love for them, not to waste it. To ask for forgiveness from Jesus who came for this reason. And most of all, to be determined to continue this prayer relationship with God that they have discovered on the inside of the prison when they get outside. Usually when I finish a visit with one of them, whether it is a formal confession or not, I say, “Do you want to pray?” “Yes,” they invariably say, as though it is normal for two men to share their souls together.



I open my hands on the table between us, face up. As though they are children, they place their hands in mine. I have no idea what these hands may have done—robbed? Sold drugs? Abused someone? “Go ahead,” I say, waiting for them to start. “Oh no, you do it,” most respond. “No, you do it,” I say. But I usually have to. They aren’t quite ready to launch out into this God territory with a virtual stranger, even one they amazingly trust because I am “Father” to them. I bow my head, feeling the calloused hands of a tough guy who would ordinarily never be resting his hands in another’s so vulnerably. **Quite a few guys have told me that they believe God got them into prison to save them from heading in the wrong direction. I use this awesome role of confessor to encourage them to foster this spark of God’s love for them, not to waste it.**

After a few moments, I start with something like, “Oh God, bless this man. Help him to get out of here so he can be the Daddy his little girl needs. Help him to know your presence and care for him as a son. That you forgive him and want him to follow this path he is on now, not to waste this moment. Blow on that spark in his heart, Lord. Make it strong. Keep him safe here, and fill him with the love of Jesus Christ, please.” Then I wait. If the inmate looks up, I motion for him to follow suit. “Go ahead,” I say. “Use

your own words. God likes that.” An unworthy stare looks back at me. *Really, Padre?* Sometimes they do speak up though, usually simply from the heart in a way that must move God because it touches me even on the most difficult days. The spark is stirred. **I know I’ll come back to this place, back to these sons and daughters of God, to learn how to pray again, to learn how to be forgiven myself.**



Now and then, an inmate will not look up. Rather, he will just leave his hands resting in mine. This can go on for a few minutes, resting in the touch of the God the Father’s love for him who is labeled a sinner. Then I close my eyes and do the same. It feels as though the earth’s violence dies down for a moment in this simple gesture: two men in prayer together while other men look on through plastic windows. When Salvo stands to go, he places his manacled hands together in a gesture of prayer. He brushes the wetness off his cheeks and says, “Your visit good. It help. You come back?” “Oh, I’ll come back,” I assure him. My glance drops to the puddle on the table. Humbled by his prayer, I know I’ll come back to this place, back to these sons and daughters of God, to learn how to pray again, to learn how to be forgiven myself.

Father Paul Morrissey O.S.A.

Fr. Paul Morrissey, O.S.A., founder of Adeodatus Prison Ministry, served as a Catholic chaplain at the Philadelphia Prison from 2007 to 2019. This article from *America* has been excerpted from a forthcoming memoir.

Michael by the Ocean

By

George Munyan O.S.A. Associate

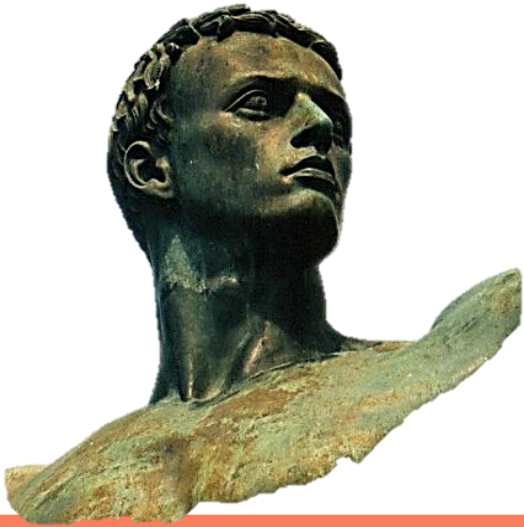


The October weather in Ocean City was incredible. Blue skies, warm sun, vibrant flowers, autumn winds and empty beaches. This was the day I had hoped for when I planned the annual Adeodatus retreat at the Augustinian residence. Our group, Adeodatus, was named after the lost son of St. Augustin. We try to bring the peace of Christ to former prisoners, the addicted, the depressed, indeed, society's wounded.

This time volunteers and the broken met to enjoy the Augustinian Seashore House with food, prayer, Mass and friendship for those of the street who are ignored, those who suffer every day with a special burden. The clergy of St. Augustine parish are there. At

this retreat in their home, I met Michael. He was homeless, hungry and wandering the hellish world of Kensington, and its streets littered with deadly drugs, staggering zombies and bodies already dead or just barely alive. It was a land of perpetual darkness and dirt under the massive elevated train that snaked above them with its screeching roar. A rescuer asked him if he wanted a ride to the ocean. The homeless have little concern for time and or destination. He said yes.

By the sparkling ocean's edge Michael told me he once owned a horse farm. He had been in the Merchant Marine. He had passed through the cliffs of Gibraltar. He had been to Singapore, Iraq and Africa. He had rescued American soldiers from Somalia. Then his life collapsed with prison and addiction. He had a child somewhere studying to be a doctor. Neither knew where the other was, or if they were even alive. His eyes stared at the sea remembering his lost world. Small tears slowly and discretely journeyed across his face though rugged still somehow youthful. How could a morning begin in the Kensington nightmare and end at a perfect seashore town on a brilliant sunny autumn day? This is what the Augustinians and the volunteers of Adeodatus have done for – bring light to the darkness, hope to the hopeless, Christ to His children. We meet at the Cascia Center at Broad and Ellsworth every Thursday night at 7:30 PM. Why not stop in some night! There are many Michaels waiting for you just to listen, and pray.



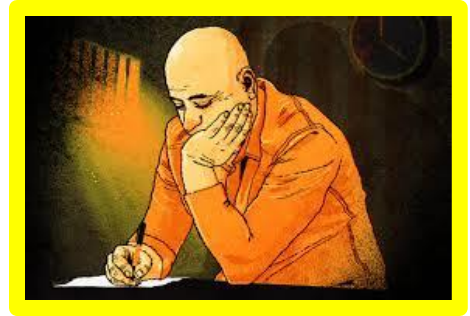
JOEY

Waiting in my car at the Walmart, I saw him approach from the side mirror. Instant decision...roll up the window or see what happens. It was a brilliantly beautiful day and the store was brand new and for some reason I felt safe. Not sure why. A voice said take a chance and talk to him if he talks to you. Tattooed and a little drunk he told me his story. He lived in a tent in the woods just beyond the parking lot, and had just survived one of the worst winters in his history. It was his third tent. One had blown away and another had been destroyed by him and a mutually panicked deer. His name was Joey and he was 47 years old. He had lived in the woods for 2 years now. He was forbidden to beg from Walmart shoppers on the parking lot. So, we agreed if he was stopped, we were just friends having a conversation. His mother lived in a senior high rise overlooking the Walmart parking lot, but he was not allowed to visit her after being found sleeping in the lobby too many times. He hadn't seen his father for decades and doubted they would even recognize each other. His father had died in his heart. Before they closed the nearby Catholic church, Fr. Bob had let him sleep and shower in the abandoned convent, and even made dinner for him now and then. But that was all over now. Joey loved God, would read his bible in his tent until it got dark. He was currently into Corinthians. Once he went to a nearby Baptist church for bible study but forgot it wasn't Sunday. The church was closed. Proud that he was drug free for 4 months Joey admitted he still needed vodka in the morning to control the shakes. Frustrated he lamented he just couldn't take life much longer. The spider bites, the rain, the despair...it was all too much. On April 5, he had remembered it was his birthday and cried bitterly. There were no cards, no cake, no recognition by anyone that he was alive. We talked about AA and places for help, but admitted he still loved alcohol too much to give it up. I told him unless he controlled it, in the end it would destroy him. Briefly, wistfully, he acknowledged the demon but then changed the subject. Although I was ten minutes past giving him a few bucks, I was now drawn to give more even though he didn't ask for it. I told him that God didn't forget his birthday and gave him twenty dollars. He was someone, and he got a birthday present no matter what he did with it. His joy was intense. He offered his hand to shake farewell. I reluctantly touched his dirty insect bitten hand. I watched him disappear amongst the cars. I was not sure if I had done the right thing...give and feed his addiction, or just give him prayers and drive away. Did I make his life better or did I hasten his end?

George Munyan O.S.A. Associate

Adeodatus

Our small group meets every Thursday night 7:30 PM, at the Cascia center (Broad and Ellsworth Streets). We create a safe zone of spiritual restoration in a world increasingly lonely and hostile to the closeness of God. We read scripture, silently meditate by candle light, and discuss God's spiritual nourishment for the week that awaits. We welcome former prisoners, their families, and all people suffering any addiction which is actually imprisoning them. We welcome those fortunate to be free of these problems but want to help their brothers and sisters. We welcome those wanting to be intimate with God, praying together in the spirit of St. Augustine.



WANT TO BE PUBLISHED IN OUR NEWSLETTER?

We welcome for possible publication: letters, poems, and drawings which illustrate our mission. Your anonymity will be honored if you so wish. Send your project to:

gtmunvan@aol.com

or

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