



Order of Malta Federal Association

We all know that the corporal acts of mercy include visiting those in prison. As members of the Order, we are called to engage in corporal acts of mercy. Yet, many of us are somewhat uncomfortable with encountering those in prison. For a long time, I explained my resistance to engaging prisoners as follows:

1. I am a volunteer, and I have a limited amount of time to devote to those I serve. I will direct my efforts to those really deserve a helping hand.
2. The corporal acts of mercy include serving the poor and the sick. I can meet my responsibilities by serving them.
3. I don't feel drawn to serve this community. My efforts are better directed elsewhere. I would not be good at it.
4. I embrace a "tough on crime," view. Prisoners have been justly convicted, and prison is supposed to be hard.
5. I would not feel safe communicating with those in prison. They could find out who I am, and I do not want to find them on my doorstep.

I did not even feel comfortable praying for those in prison. I did not want to help them- plain and simple. I was convinced that I am better than them (I still catch myself thinking that, sometimes- but I am working on it). Perhaps some of you have had these same feelings.

Something changed. I got a silly notion that maybe God wanted me to do something that made me uncomfortable. How strong is my faith if I only say, "Yes," to the easy things? How do I live out my commitment to obedience if I only say, "Yes," to the things I want to do? How can I live out the call to be merciful if I only help the heroes, and choose to neglect the *undesirables*?

Maybe God wants me to reach out to prisoners, not because He is working on them, but because He is working on me. Maybe I have to grow spiritually if I am going to serve those in prison. Maybe the primary object of this exercise is to work on MY conversion.

As I started down this path, the five reasons I described above started to dissipate.

1. I am a volunteer, and I have a limited amount of time to devote to those I serve. I will direct my efforts to those really deserve a helping hand. *Who am I to decide who deserves a helping hand? God can judge them without my help. Are the souls of those in prison any less important to God than my own?*
2. The corporal acts of mercy include serving the poor and the sick. I can meet my responsibilities by serving them instead. *Here is a quote from the*



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commentary to the Regulations, “The witness and protection of the faith remain incomplete without the devotion to, “God’s poor.” Besides, this is the privileged place where Christ wants to be sought and found; here is the place where He wants His disciples to witness His presence and the God-given divinity of every human being.”

3. I don’t feel drawn to serve this community. My efforts are better directed elsewhere. I would not be good at it. *This community includes Jesus, Peter, Paul, and our patron Saint, John the Baptist. We are called simply to visit them. Most of us will visit them through our prayers, letters, and cards. If you are good at praying, you can be good at prison ministry. If you are not good at praying, what a great place to practice!*
4. I embrace a “tough on crime,” view. Prisoners have been justly convicted, and prison is supposed to be hard. *We are called to visit them, not be their advocates. Most will be released at some point. If you treat them like savage animals, what do you think will become of them?*
5. I would not feel safe communicating with those in prison. They could find out who I am, and I do not want to find them on my doorstep. *In our pen pal program, we do not reveal our identities, address, or contact information. We use the Order’s address in Washington, DC for a return address, and the Order forwards the prisoner’s letters to us. Most of us correspond with someone in another state.*

Take notice how often Pope Francis takes time to visit those in prison, especially when he travels around the world to visit the faithful and world leaders. He puts the prisoners ahead of important people and those who are more deserving of his time.

In the most recent issue of The Texas Catholic Herald, Cardinal DiNardo closed his Shepherd’s Message with a post script sharing his gratitude for celebrating sacraments in one of the prisons, and inviting us to pray for those who bring pastoral care and hope for those in prison. That can be you.

We have four men who are looking for a pen pal. Prayerfully consider whether you can bring pastoral care and hope to one of them.