



## Order of Malta Federal Association

I want to share with you some observations from my participation in a retreat at a Terrell Prison Unit in May. I thought I might do so looking through the filter of John the Baptist. As an Order, we are about to celebrate the Nativity of our Patron Saint. It is fitting for us to recall some of the qualities that make him so impressive:

- He had an incredible zeal for the Lord;
- His prayers were so beautiful that Christ's followers wanted to learn to pray like John taught his followers (which led to the Lord's Prayer: Lk 11:1);
- His self-denial and humility; and
- He was a prisoner!

Like Lourdes, we organized into smaller groups at the retreat. Instead of colors, we were in families. I was assigned to the family of Luke. There were six inmates and three "free world" members-two lay and one clergy. One of the men assigned to my table was clearly a leader. You could tell he was respected by all- the other prisoners, the correctional officers, and the chaplain. He was a powerful force within the prison community.

Like John, he was a natural leader. Part of what makes his story interesting is that he wasn't just a former gang member- he had been the general.

Like John, he had a zeal for the Lord. He became a Christian in 2004. He had his conversion after he went to prison. Since then, he has been bringing prisoners, correctional officers, and "free worlders" to the Lord.

Like John, he has a gift for crafting beautiful prayers. His prayers weren't just pretty words. He had that gift that allowed him to touch our hearts. His prayers had our entire table with tears in our eyes.

Like John, he was humble. Power and stature is an interesting and highly prized commodity in the prison eco-system. He used his power and stature to serve the Lord- not himself. In doing so, he exercised a level of self-denial that would be the envy of the most pious monk.

Finally, like John, he was a prisoner. I mention this not to exalt the status of a prisoner, but to invite you to be open to the notion that those in prison deserve our care and support. Our Church was largely built by men who went to prison- John the Baptist, Peter, Paul, John, and Christ himself.

One can say they were imprisoned for their faith and didn't deserve to be imprisoned. Do prisoners deserve mercy? Do we?

We get salvation, not because we deserve it, but because Jesus hung on the cross in agony and pain for us. In the middle of his pain and agony, he took the time to respond to the criminal hanging on the cross next to him. Like us, the criminal received the promise of salvation. Not because he (we) deserve it, but because Jesus loves us. Who are we to withhold mercy to those in prison because we find them underserving?