

## Lay Carmelite Apostolate and Prison Ministry



Prison Ministry: (from left) Herman and Susie Briones, Emmie Manalo, Bernadette and Anthony Saint James (Saint Elijah LCC in North Hollywood, California), with Rose Brown during the community of Saint Elijah's first meeting with her.

BY BERNADETTE SAINT JAMES, TOC, SAINT ELIJAH LAY CARMELITE COMMUNITY #537,  
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To my surprise, God was preparing me for something big. He led my attention from community meetings, organizing retreats, and preoccupation with council concerns to the women's prison in Chowchilla, California. Five years ago my experience of being a Lay Carmelite changed when I received a letter from a 20 year-old young woman named Rose who was my former high school student. Her letter stated that she was in jail, potentially facing a 25-year-to-life prison sentence. In my disbelief I was compelled to turn to God with many anguishing questions pertaining to justice. It seemed that her delicate young life was hanging in the mercy of God's hands.

My first opportunity to see Rose was in the county jail and was limited to a 30 minute taped conversation behind a glass window, speaking by telephone. As the very emotional moment etched in my memory forever, I shared the small noisy room with a crowd of visitors who likewise were communicating with their loved ones. The irony of seeing Rose on the other side of the glass partition with her hair carefully curled and delicately arranged on top of her head, this little woman of less than five feet tall, and wearing an orange jump suit far too big for her small frame, left me with the impression that she was too young, vulnerable and very much out-of-place in the jail environment. I wondered to myself, "What could God's will be in this?"

Communication was painfully difficult. Through her stream of tears she explained an impending hearing would soon determine her future for an incident that occurred four years earlier when she was 16 years old. Being at a loss for words and realizing I was not sufficiently able to offer legal advice or answers to the reasons of her arrest, I instinctively knew there was a way to reach her heart, and that was through prayer. As her former high school religion teacher I was well aware of Rose's intellectual capacities and familiar with her devotion to the rosary. In her pocket she hid a personal rosary made from the strands of wool she pulled from her cell blanket. By knotting the string, Rose created her own prayer beads. But the moment demanded something more radical.

Rose needed determination to make God her complete focus. Not only to give her peace, hope, and courage but, more importantly, for her very survival.

In spite of the glass partition we centered ourselves in God's love. God's peace was present to us. I taught Rose to breathe, relax, and to surrender into God's light and love. We sat silently in the midst of the loud confusing visitors' room as the beginning of a contemplative practice. Gradually, the fear, anxiety and confusion were settled by interior silence as we repeated the words, "Jesus, have mercy." The thick glass of separation did not seem to be as threatening or as intrusive as before. In the silence, I asked her to listen to God's voice above any other internal or external sound. In that moment the room stood still as fear and confusion ceased to grip her mind and heart.

On February 14, 2008, upon the poor counsel of her attorney, Rose accepted a 15-year-to-life sentence. A three-year dark night ensued where the broken emotions and memories of childhood were touched upon by the work of the Holy Spirit making discernible the Light of Christ within. God's healing touch gently entered the areas of her heart and mind that lie far beyond human reach. Transformation, courage, and peace emerged through this process while she struggled to seek greater understanding.

Visiting Rose every month for five years has presented the opportunity to share Carmelite spirituality with her which has evolved in her expressed interest to become a Lay Carmelite. She has acquired morning and evening prayer, studies and meditates on the Word of God in the practice of *lectio divina*, and enjoys quiet contemplation. Rose states that Carmelite spirituality has helped her find practical ways to apply her Catholic faith in the challenging prison environment. She says, "Prayer has enabled me to center myself. To begin my day on a spiritual note makes it a positive

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# Niagara Priest's Papal Connection



By TONY RICCIUTO, NIAGARA FALLS REVIEW

**W**hen Pope Benedict celebrated his 79th birthday, Father John Jay Comerford, O.Carm., was in Italy to wish him a happy birthday.

The year was 2006 and Father Comerford, an associate pastor at Mount Carmel Spiritual Centre, was on a four-month sabbatical in Rome.

He was among the 100 priests and deacons helping to give Holy Communion during the Easter service.

"Just as the procession was heading

down to leave, a German college student yelled out, 'Happy Birthday Holy Father,'" said Comerford, who was 10 feet from Pope Benedict. "There must have been about 30,000 people and they all started singing Happy Birthday simultaneously in their own languages. He spent half an hour walking down the aisle and shaking hands with people, and no one can leave until the Pope has cleared.


"I almost got to shake his hand, but sometimes, what happens at the last moment, people will rush forward and they almost knock you over as they try to get closer," said Comerford, a high school teacher for 33 years.

Benedict—who turns 86 in April—took Catholics by surprise when he announced he is stepping down on February 28. He is the first pontiff to resign in nearly 600 years. Comerford said picking the next pope will be different. There is a living pope and no time is needed for a funeral.

When Benedict resigns, he returns to being Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. He cannot take part in picking his successor.

"It would be interesting to be in restaurants around Rome to hear the different discussions," said Comerford. "There are people who are really great with language knowledge, there are those who are progressive or conservative, and there are those who have experience with people around the world. Those are all factors that come into it, but when the doors close and the cardinals are voting they are the only ones in there; they have to do everything."

Comerford said the next pope could come from any of a number of countries. Pope John Paul II, a Pole, was the first non-Italian pope in 455 years.

Comerford expects to see the process completed before Holy Week so that there will be a new pope by Easter. 

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one. To end the night with contemplation quiets my spirit and opens me to a calm direction for the demands of the upcoming day."

The community of Saint Elijah located in the Los Angeles area has become an extended family and a source of support for Rose. After our first visit Emmie Manalo expressed, "Gathering around Rose was a powerful experience. Our community has long awaited the opportunity to visit her after years of correspondence." When the members of Saint Elijah finally met Rose, there wasn't a dry eye at the table! There was laughter and also a lesson shared by Formation Director Susie Briones about the important virtue of humility which Rose says has helped her when dealing with difficult circumstances of prison life. "The support of the Lay Carmelites has provided important relationships to the outside world," says Rose, "providing hope in an isolating experience."

Carmel's potential to bring the light of Christ to the world finds a place in the prison population. As members of Christ's Body, the lay Carmelites of Saint Elijah discover the strength of our vocation

planted in the midst of human suffering. Rose was moved by her experience stating, "Meeting with the Carmelite Community sheds light on how Jesus loves me in my human brokenness. Their example has motivated me to reach deeper into my faith and to help me overcome obstacles. It's easy to feel unworthy in a place like this, but the Carmelites have welcomed me with open arms and for this I am so thankful. The outpouring of love and kindness has truly touched me."

Rose is growing in her desire and enthusiasm to serve and has become an inmate advocate helping to bring awareness to the importance of restorative justice. Volunteering as secretary to the Juvenile Offenders Program, her efforts to help pass laws in Congress has found support by California State Governor Jerry Brown, who recently signed in favor of Senate Bill 9. Rose assists this campaign and its goal to rehabilitate juvenile offenders enabling them to become productive citizens in society.

Saint John of the Cross suffered nine months of confinement in a narrow jail cell in a Toledo prison. This experience impacted his life, producing historical results that provided the fire for the Carmelite reform. In months of darkness and isolation, God's light made a pathway to John's soul. In his existential search he found God in the darkness that comes with silence and solitude. But for John, this was no ordinary darkness; this darkness enabled his heart to receive the Light of Christ that transforms destructive human tendencies and attachments that inhibit freedom. Like John, I discovered the charisms of Carmel can challenge the walls of confinement leading one to embrace the ultimate escape route which is freedom in the Spirit.

"For freedom, Christ has set us free!" These words of Saint Paul found in Galatians speak to the heart of a shared life in Christ. For Rose, as for most of us, the path that leads to freedom in Jesus Christ is a journey of challenge that ultimately leads one to greater love and joy. The first step to this freedom requires that one find the courage to remove the interior walls of personal imprisonment. Like Saint John of the Cross, prison life has ironically become an opportunity to find the road that leads to the Holy One, who in complete surrender and trust in God alone, provides each of his children the light that is often hidden in the dark night. 