

Residents Encounter Christ team razes prison walls with faith

By Teresa A. Parsons
EDITOR'S NOTE: Fictitious names have been used to protect the identities of all inmates.

As the sun went down one Sunday last month, 19 people filed silently between the towering walls of the Auburn Correctional Facility and heard the gate clang behind them.

This was no jail-break. In fact, these people seemed strangely reluctant to leave. Instead, they milled around, took pictures, shook hands and hugged one another until finally there was nothing left but to climb into their cars and drive home.

Thus ended REC Five, the fifth Residents Encounter Christ weekend at Auburn and the eighth in upstate New York.

By their own admission, leaving was the roughest part of the encounter for the 19-member team — more difficult than the months of preparation, a long weekend away from family or the hassles of dealing with prison bureaucracy.

"This is always the worst," said Tony Rocchi of Elmira, who's been on all but one of the eight REC weekends. "Leaving them behind like this, it really gets to you every time."

Meanwhile, inside the walls, past the guardhouse with its metal detector and the barred gates, the strains of "Mighty Lord" slowly died away. In a drab prison classroom, more than 20 inmates lined up to be strip-searched before returning to their reality — what one REC song describes as "cellblocks, bedchecks, screamin' inmates ... countdowns, concrete, lousy mail calls, CO's checkin', noisy mess halls."

For some inmates, the encounter marked their first outside contact since coming to Auburn. For all of them, the outpouring of concern and care by strangers was an inexplicable joy.

That was especially obvious at the encounter's high point, a hootenany on Saturday evening when more than 90 outsiders came into the prison to surprise the inmates. "I been in and out of jails all my life, and I never seen any place in my life that cares this much about inmates in jail," said a tearful inmate. "Thank you for thinking and caring about us even though we done wrong."

Based on a Catholic renewal movement known as Cursillo, REC brings 15 or more "outsiders" together with as many as 40 inmates for three days of witnessing, prayer, liturgy and song. Beginning on Friday morning, the group is divided by tables, each combining inmates and team members. A

series of 15 talks are given to the larger group, interspersed with small group discussion and presentations.

The encounter's power lies in the talks and witnesses, which avoid "preaching" by being intensely personal. As team members and inmates share their stories of faith and frailty, both begin to realize that sometimes the only difference between them is that the inmates were caught.

But even when their experiences are worlds apart, it's a revelation to inmates that "straight" people have problems too.

At the same time, the inmates' willingness to trust in God's mercy and forgiveness is a strong tonic for anyone tempted to give up on himself. The weekend succeeds in crumbling walls much higher and thicker than those around Auburn — those that separate straight life from street life.

If prison seems an unlikely atmosphere for spiritual reflection, team members are equally unusual and disparate people. It's difficult to imagine them coming together in any other setting, but they begin to meet some two months before the encounter to prepare their talks, pray together and become what can only be compared to a fraternity in its truest sense — a brotherhood.

It's easy to commend them for devoting hours of their private lives preparing for one weekend with convicted men they've never met before. But theirs is not a totally selfless mission.

"We don't have any answers," said Dave Lortscher, a veteran team member. "All we can bring is our love and our stories. And we leave with a lot more than we brought."

Time after time, team members are touched in unexpected ways by the openness and spirituality of the inmates.

"I can't believe I'm hearing what I'm hearing from these men in jail," said Paul Dwyer, who was on his first encounter. "Some of the things they've said are just so incredibly moving."

One man began a witness in rousing born-again style, raising his chubby arms and proclaiming "I accepted the Lord Jesus as my personal savior 15 months ago ...". Moments later he was recounting an episode of almost complete despair. "I had made myself a rope and I was going to hang myself," he said quietly. "I was ready to end my life. I knelt down on the floor and started to cry, and it was then the Lord Jesus came to me."

Another inmate looked back on time spent on death row. "Back then I made all kinds of



Team members for the fifth Residents Encounter Christ weekend at Auburn Correctional Facility are: (first row, left to right) Father John Kilian, chaplain of a Wyoming County Correctional Facility, Jerry Carl, Paul Dwyer, John Overton, John Kanalley, Tom Treis, rector of the weekend, Chuck Boda, Gary LaLonde, Mike Salotto; (second row) Ellie and Fritz Palleschi, Bob Bacher, Tony Rocchi, Jim Lowenguth, Tony Phillips, Jim Favreau, Father Tom Corbett, Mike Lobisco and Dave Lortscher. They're shown here just outside the prison wall.

promises to God if he would save my life," he said. "Then when I got off, I forgot all about God and started running, and I been running ever since up till now ... if there's one thing I learned, it's that you better be very careful when you make a promise to the Lord. 'Cause he don't forget."

Although prison officials allow inmates to attend only one REC weekend, they do permit two former inmates to return for part of the weekend as team members. One such inmate told of his downhill slide on the outside and conversion inside, saying: "I turned to my brothers for help, and they turned away. I turned to my sisters, and they turned away, too. So I turned to the community. They called me scum. Then I turned to Jesus, and he said 'Come to me, child.' I been singing and dancing for him ever since."

Almost no one fails to join in the spirit of the weekend, but carrying their new sense of brotherhood back to the cellblocks and the yard afterward requires a deeper, more fundamental change of heart.

"There's a lot of real conversion that goes on here, but a lot of con, too," said team

member Bob Bacher. "In the end, it doesn't really matter. We're here and they're here, and the rest is up to the Lord."

That's not to say, however, that REC ends with the weekend. A critical aspect of the program is continuing support for inmates in the form of a weekly get-together for prayer and fellowship. Some team members drive to Auburn from as far as Rochester and Elmira every Tuesday night.

"I used to see the walls and smokestack of this place, and think 'There's nothing but dirt in there — they all deserve it,'" said a young inmate named Daniel. "Now there's nothing I want more when I get out than to be able to come back in on Tuesday nights."

Bacher and another Fairport resident, Sandy Sinopli, brought REC to the area six years ago after attending an encounter at Fishkill Correctional Facility near New York City. Since then, REC has been taken to the Groveland facility in Sonoma and to Auburn. Organizers have been trying, so far unsuccessfully, to arrange for a REC weekend at Elmira Correctional Facility.

The fact that each encounter is given a name echoes the assertions of veterans like Rocchi, Bacher and Lortscher — that each is an historic faith event. In fact, the glowing praise they heap upon this experience pales in direct proportion to its profusion — until it's been experienced, that is.

Perhaps the best summation comes from team member Chuck Boda's son who, after participating in a hootenany at Groveland, remarked "Boy Daddy, I feel Jesus right here in my heart."

A former inmate remembers what REC meant to him

By Teresa A. Parsons
 Residents Encounter Christ (REC) reaches most inmates for a weekend, but the men in whose lives it makes a clear and demonstrable difference are few.

Jose is one of them. When he was arrested 11 years ago and sentenced to 15 years to life, he believed his life was over. In his eight years at Auburn, he never once had a visitor.

"I lost a lot of things," he said of his imprisonment. "Most of all, those years of my freedom."

Although he was raised a Catholic, Jose remembers relying on God like a talisman. Even when he knew he doing something wrong, he somehow believed God was with him and would protect him.

It was while he was in a downstate prison, in solitary confinement or "the Bin," that he began to know God in a different way. He was lying in a cell containing nothing but a metal bunk when fellow inmate walked by. Jose asked if he could have a blanket or mattress, but instead he was given a Bible. He read it.

Eventually he joined the Legion of Mary and emerged as a leader among Christian inmates. Jose said at that point, because of factional rivalries, other inmates began to threaten him and circulate the rumor that he was an informer. In the microcosmic prison world, where feuds erupt over who gets an extra slice of cheese at lunch, such rumors can be deadly.

Each time he approached a crowded hall or doorway, Jose remembered feeling frozen by fear and praying fervently. And it seemed that each time he prayed, he'd see a guard appear out of nowhere to protect him.

When he heard about the first REC at Auburn, Jose recalled scoffing at the idea. One fellow inmate's comment stuck in his mind: "They just want to take us over there for three days and wash our brains."

Nevertheless, he took a risk and signed up. In reliving what REC meant to him then, his eyes and voice become choked with tears.

"I started to see a different way to live as a Christian in jail. The faith and love I found behind those walls," he said, leaving the sentence unfinished as he shook his head and

wiped his brimming eyes.

Since inmates are not allowed to attend more than one REC at Auburn, Jose and other encounter alumni began to meet on Tuesdays and Saturdays as a support group. Team members from "outside" also attend the Tuesday sessions.

Jose's sentence was commuted last year by Governor Mario Cuomo, and he has settled in Rochester with help from REC team members and others. He's found a job and is pursuing his favorite hobbies — painting and woodcarving — when he can.

He has joined the REC team, but his parole prohibits him from visiting the prison for one year. After that restriction is lifted, he hopes to lend his witness to the team.

His sentence may be over, but his real struggle has just begun. Jose compared his situation to the story of St. Peter's attempt to imitate Jesus and walk on water. Like Peter, Jose said, he has doubted and begun to sink back into the troubled waters around him. "But all that I have achieved so far is precious to me, so I think 'I'd better not do that,'" he said. "God has lifted me up. I won't let Him down."

Mercy High Open House


Our Lady of Mercy High School's annual open house for seventh and eighth graders and their parents will be Tuesday, Oct. 29, 7 p.m. to 9 p.m..

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