

"Restorative Justice on Easter Morning" by Rev. Michael Kennedy, S.J.

Early on Easter morning, one hundred and fifty people of faith gathered before sunrise in front of Barry J. Nidorf Juvenile Hall in Sylmar, California.

The taper touched the twirling flame from the fire, lighting the wick. Despite the gentle drizzle, the taper's flame remained strong as it lit the paschal candle. In the darkness of the early morning, this single candle speaks boldly of how God can bring life out of death.

From the paschal candle came the flames for all the candles of those gathered. The first candles lit were Juanita's and Tomas's, who, with tears running down their cheeks, held tightly to the photograph of their daughter and granddaughter. Their tears screamed into the early morning darkness, as they recall the loss of their daughter and granddaughter to the insane action of an enraged boyfriend, who crashed his car into the living room of their home, crushing their daughter and her baby in her arms. Her other child was pushed through a crack in the wall and survived. Juanita and Tomas were also present in the room with other family members who witnessed this family death scene.

In the midst of so much darkness, Tomas spoke of forgiving the person who killed his daughter, and of feeling closer to her this Easter morning. Juanita spoke of how the Lord's Prayer teaches us to forgive. Through her faith, she has found strength in forgiving the man who brought such pain to their family.

Then Juanita lit the candles of Emma and Consuelo, both of whom have recently lost their sons to violence. Emma spoke calmly of the healing that God has brought to her family but also the pain that is still present; how everyday as a mother she walks by the room of her child who was killed. Her heart is broken and wears the permanent scars of the tragedy.

Emma then lit the candle of Jonni, who for nineteen months lived inside the compound at the juvenile hall here at Sylmar. He had not returned here since his release some months ago and was visibly shaken being so near to his former cell. Now with his lighted candle, he read a powerful prayer addressed to his friends still locked up inside Unit W. Once again, the pain cut into the early morning drizzle at this isolated place of the world that has sent our youth to die in prisons. The darkness, so symbolic of how we are the only country in the world to sentence youth without the possibility of ever being free.

Jonni lit the candle of Maria, the mother of Adrian. In her other hand, Maria held the photo of her sons, one who is locked up in Unit X at Sylmar and the other son,

Jesse, who is now beginning his sentence of 110 years at High Desert Prison. He was only 15 years old when he committed his crime.

When Maria lit Franky's candle, there was a brightness of hope that filled the morning air. Franky, who had been unjustly imprisoned for twenty years and released a month ago, spoke of the pain of looking out at the parents of kids facing life sentences. He spoke of how he was unable to attend the funeral of his own father because he was locked up. The tears welling up in his eyes communicated the deep pain within him. For twenty years, lies had deprived him of freedom. Now some of those who lied in court begged him for forgiveness.

Since some pain cannot be carried alone, we gathered in a circle around the paschal candle that Easter morning. For some, the flow of pain, comfort, and hope makes no sense, possibly because they have never fallen into the endless abyss of losing a child to violence or a prison system. Yet in the early morning, the pain mixed with hope given to us by the Crucified One raised to new life, brought a healing power to those gathered. It could not be seen with eyesight, but something deeper was present. It burned into the early morning. It was stronger than hate and stronger than the vengeance that so many would hold against the person who killed their child. It was the power of something greater. This is the fabric of true religion, not the fancy-dressed "alleluias" of people singing joyfully, "Christ is risen!" and then calling kids monsters the next day in court, their hearts hardened against any possibility of forgiveness and healing.

As the circle of lighted candles spread out into the congregation, the healing and forgiveness invited and challenged us to provide a presence of love in a punitive, vengeful society - an unforgettable experience of God. I had been immersed into the deep Paschal Mystery: God brings life out of death. Such a clear image of restorative justice around the paschal candle was engraved on my heart this early Easter morning.