

Sowing Seeds and Feeding Ant Hill

by

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For more than a decade now I have been telling readers about evangelizing souls in prison. This sort of apostolate is a tremendous privilege to do. Our work is exciting and frustrating, joyful and sad, fun and, at times, dangerous. Due to the predictability of human nature the prison evangelist can usually anticipate what is going to happen in a given situation. However, because our human nature causes us to respond to some influences with extreme emotional response, occasionally we have no way of knowing what a person will do next.

An evangelist is a tag-team salesman. The salesman presents the product with its features and benefits to prospective buyers. The evangelist's product, of course, is Catholicism. Once the presentation has been made, the Holy Spirit comes in for the close. In the close of this particular sale the Holy Spirit pours out the graces of faith while speaking to the most secret inner core of the prospect, which is his conscience. At this point there are only three possible responses the prospect can give: 1.) "I want it"; 2.) "I don't want it"; or 3.) "Thanks, but not right now." When the third response is given the evangelist can only shrug, commit himself to pray for the soul, and say, "Well, at least the seed has been sown."

It is the nature of an evangelist to be result oriented. We like to see the results of our work. We do not necessarily have to see success. Good or bad, yes or no, we just want to see closure to what we have begun. The unfortunate reality of seed sowing is that we rarely get to see the outcome. Occasionally I will hear from a man who went home or was transferred to another prison, telling me he converted. That is not usually the case, though.

Our apostolate began fifteen years ago, a year after I came to prison. Until five years ago we worked at Bullock Prison, but I was transferred to Draper Prison just over five years ago. This camp, as we call Alabama prisons, is more difficult for this evangelist to work in. Draper is a camp intended for young first-time offenders. They keep a few of us old cons around for balance and, hopefully, a positive influence on these youngsters. Admittedly, I just cannot understand the apathetic generation coming to prison now. I've grown old, I suppose. The kid sleeping next to me was not yet potty trained when I came to prison. Yeah, I've grown old.

As I said, though, there are a few old cons here. One man was Harold. Although I have only known Harold for five years, he and I began our prison careers within months of each other back in the 80's, when another cowboy occupied the White House. Harold was a tough nut to crack. At every opportunity I would try to share the faith with Harold, but every effort was rebuffed.

Harold was anti-Catholic. He held no guile toward any particular Catholic, but he believed the Church was the Whore of Babylon. No amount of well-reasoned apologetics or biblical evidence could convince Harold of the error to which he held. The man was just a typical product of his fundamentalist upbringing.

Almost a year ago, Harold began to complain of aches and pains he had never had before. When Harold became so pain-burdened he could no longer work it occurred to all of us that he was dying.

The prison system has practiced passive euthanasia for decades. In other words, they ordinarily let a man die rather than treat him, because death is cheaper than treatment. For many months the medical people told Harold he had kidney stones. When he confronted them two months ago that he knew he was dying, the authorities finally admitted that Harold had prostate cancer.

Harold had no one in the world that cared about him. At sixty-two, Harold often spoke glowingly of his elderly mother, his wife, his children, and his grandchildren. The sad truth was, Harold had not seen his mother, wife, or children in sixteen years. It is my guess that he only assumed he had grandchildren.

Harold was typical of many abandoned men. Every night at mail call he would stand patiently while names were called out. But the hope in his eyes would die when the last letter was passed out. In the five years I knew Harold I never saw him get a letter. Many is the night, though, I would see him drag out his pictures to look at Mamma, his wife, and his kids.

I do not know why Harold was in prison, and I do not care. No human being is immune to love or the need for love, and no man deserves to die without love. With that realization I tried to reach Harold one last time.

It was a difficult task, but I spoke very candidly with Harold about death. No convict likes to think about dying in prison. Dying in prison isn't cool. Cool is dying at home in bed, surrounded by your kids and grandkids. Dying in prison is the epitome of loneliness in the apex of fear. Harold knew he was dying, but he did not want to talk about it.

Rebuffed again, I started to leave. Then inspiration struck. I had an old, faded holy card of St. Joseph that I always carried. On the back of it was a prayer to His Majesty's Foster Father for a happy death. The beauty of the card's classic artwork attracted Harold, so I gave it to him. That ended our conversation, and it turned out to be the last time we ever spoke.

Harold got so sick he could no longer get out of bed, so they carried him into the prison infirmary. He lingered there for nearly three weeks. I repeatedly asked permission to go visit with him, keep him company, maybe just read to him, but the reply was always a forceful "no." It seems the authorities were set in stone to let Harold die all alone. (I admit being somewhat selfish in wanting to sit with Harold; it could have just as easily been me in that deathbed.)

Finally word came that Harold died. I did my job. I planted the seed. Did it do any good? I do not know, but I can speculate. When they emptied Harold's pockets they found a picture. The picture was not of his mother. Nor was it his wife. No, not even a picture of his children was to be found. What they found in his pocket was an old worn and faded picture of St. Joseph. Maybe, just maybe.

Well, they buried Harold today. When a convict's body is not claimed he is laid to rest in the prison cemetery. Ours is called Ant Hill, because it is infested with fire ants. So six convicts stood among the stinging ants to dig Harold's grave. Then those same six men carried Harold in a plain, unfinished wooden box to his final resting place among the ants and other abandoned convicts who passed before him.

Convicts have their own way of paying tribute to a man unfortunate enough to die in here. After lowering Harold's body into the grave, the six convicts stood by the open grave. One man tossed in a spoonful of instant coffee. Another tossed in a hand-rolled cigarette. A third tossed in a match. This is done so the deceased can stay occupied while he awaits his freedom through resurrection.

I think a lot about dying in prison. Like Harold, I am abandoned by all who share my blood. Perhaps unlike Harold, I no doubt deserve that. As the gray overtakes the black on my head and wrinkles replace the smooth I consider what it is to die here. For non-Catholics it must be terrifying. For the Catholic, however, although it is not desirable, prison is not such a bad place from which to go to Heaven.

A seed was planted, then the fruit fed Ant Hill. I am confident that Harold died my brother. So what lesson is to be learned? We must never pass up an opportunity to evangelize, and we must never give up on the seemingly hopeless case. The eternal destiny of souls depend on it.

Eternal rest grant to him, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon him. May Harold's soul and all the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen