

By Christopher Lushis

As an undergraduate student I first took steps to learn about prison ministry. A friend of mine was the chaplain for the South Bend Juvenile Correctional Facility in Indiana, and he invited me to join him. While this was an environment I had never experienced before, being able to minister to people close to my own age – primarily through praying the rosary, reading Scripture, and answering questions about Theology and life in general – provided a foundation for my own ministry that I hoped to build upon in the future.

This past year, my first at Boston College in the School of Theology and Ministry, offered another opportunity to serve those living behind bars. With a few other students, on many Sundays throughout the semester, we would drive to Suffolk County Correctional Facility and assist in whatever capacity was needed. During my time there, I have led and assisted communion services for primarily two groups of inmates. My first few weeks were spent with a group of women who were sentenced to live varying years in the prison. While working with young adults, I was able to keep the room focused on myself and on the individuals who wanted to speak. However, in this new setting, many carried on side conversations and showed that they obviously saw this as purely an opportunity to do something outside of their cell for a change. Nevertheless, I encouraged people to address the group when they had something to say or wanted to lift up an intention. I listened intently to others and offered my own opinions on the readings; I felt productive if I could leave the room having touched at least one person or provided somewhat thought provoking insights to one of the women.

Since Suffolk County Correctional is a large co-ed facility with many inmates serving in different capacities, it was not long before I was switched to working with another group – one in which I would remain for the duration of the academic year. This time I was invited to offer Sunday communion services to inmates who were soon to be released back into society. While the

groups of women typically amassed about 30 people, this group had usually 3-6 people who attended per week. Although we may not have had as many people attend in this group, the insights and questions we could address went into much greater detail with these men. The individuals coming to our services knew that soon their entire environment would be ones that had previously led to their current incarceration – and they knew that changes needed to be made if they hoped to find happiness and success.

These men were committed to starting new ways of living, being productive members of society, and taking their faith more seriously.

The services we provided allowed them to take part in a weekly Eucharistic celebration and to reach out to others for practical advice that may end up saving or transforming their lives.

I can only hope that these men, and everyone I have had the privilege of ministering to, have been able to take something from the services we offered or from our presence with them and have continued to search for a meaningful relationship with God in their own lives. My involvement with prison ministry has been as much a service to others as it has been a learning experience of my own. I pray for these men and women, and invite others to as well. It is crucial for our success as a society that not only those who have fallen into sinful and immoral situations to arise and begin anew, but also for those who have persisted on the right path to help and encourage others to walk with them. Simply confining people to live in prison does not remove them from the human family, nor should we ever believe that we are in a better moral state than them; I assure you that many are fully aware of their own failings and areas in need of improvement, perhaps more than we are! I invite others to investigate ways to minister to others in their own lives – not necessarily to prisoners, but to whomever they encounter who feels marginalized or without hope. It is our baptismal call to love God and to serve others. We must do so in whatever ways we able, to the fullest extent possible. The rest is up to God.