

## **HOPE**

**by Rev. Michael Kennedy, S.J.**

**September 11, 2011**

On Friday, September 9, the San Joaquin Valley had cooled to a mere 95 degrees as we arrived at Corcoran State Prison.

We began the day in yard D. We knew many of the brothers in this yard from former retreats we had conducted here.

The first cell we visited was that of Jose. The moment we saw him he asked, "What's happening to SB9?" His mother had been among the group that had gone to Sacramento along with parents who have had relatives killed. Both groups, out of their common pain, have lobbied for the passage of this bill. Jose was proud of his own mother, who was dedicated to changing cruel and unjust laws against youth.

Jose, who spoke to me through the small crack of the door, told me how he had been given hope ever since receiving a questionnaire from Human Rights Advocate, Elizabeth Calvin. He also spoke about his kid with whom he hopes one day to be reunited.

Jose received LWOP (Life without the Possibility of Parole) for being at the scene where one of his friends went crazy and killed someone. He spoke about the family of the person who was killed, about how he prays for the family every day because he knows that this life can never be replaced. He also regrets and is truly sorry for being at the scene of a crime that has caused so much sorrow to so many.

At that moment, I recalled being at a house in Sacramento where we had been invited along with fifteen legislators three days earlier. Javier Stauring from the Office of Restorative Justice and I spoke with an assembly person who told us how he had been raised in the barrio and knows firsthand the challenges that confront kids of color in the midst of so much violence. He also told us that his priority is to implement programs so that kids don't end up in situations where they are facing a sentence of LWOP.

Encouraged by his attitude, we then asked him about his stance on SB9. The assembly person said that the Catholic Church would not be happy with his position in that he would be voting NO. We questioned him about the idea of second chances.

Now four days after the last day of voting in Sacramento, I am standing in front of Jose with his LWOP sentence. All I can hear ringing from the cell is "give me a second chance." Jose having been locked in his cell for this past week still carries hope.

Would our leaders in Sacramento vote for a second chance for Jose?

Throughout the day, I went from cell to cell and from tier to tier. Again and again, I looked into the eyes of young and old who have received LWOP sentences. Each one spoke of the many

reasons to give them a second chance: we were kids when we committed our crime, our brains were not fully developed, we were not the person who committed the crime, we were just there.

I told each of them that these reasons don't make any difference to many of the legislators. Then tell us Fr. Mike, "Why won't these legislators give us another chance?"

I reflected on the conversation with the assembly person. This person could not give us any good reason. I wondered what he would say as the words "second chance" echoed loudly around these cement walls. What would he say to Jose, Antonio, Victor, Hector and Jaime?

I did not know what to say to these young men.

But this did not stop them for saying "Fr. Mike we are not giving up hope. We know that one day our elected leaders will see how cruel and unjust LWOP is and how this bill will only help those who have changed one hundred percent.

As I went from cell to cell amidst the noise of yet another overcrowded prison, these young men locked down in their small cells said repeatedly how much they appreciate the people on the outs who have worked for this bill.

"We know that they know we are not monsters, that they know we have made mistakes in our youth and have changed, are different now and deserve a second chance. Our actions speak of this." The look in their eyes reflected their gratitude for everyone trying to give kids a second chance.

After meeting with the assembly person in Sacramento, I could hardly sleep. If I could have brought this person to Corcoran, would his vote have been different? At least he would have realized that these men are not monsters; that they are redeemable, and deserve a second chance.

As I drove away from the grey cement fortress, rather than feeling heart-broken by being with these LWOP brothers, I was uplifted.

Jesus is right. He threw his lot in with the very ones who were regarded as worthless by society. My soul was grateful to be with these ones the very day our legislators were one vote short of passing a bill to give them a second chance.

I left this prison with more hope than when I arrived. The hope-filled spirit of these brothers entered me as I looked into the rear view mirror and the huge structure disappeared slowly on the horizon.

The pain of victims, the pain of families affected by crime soaked into the ground as the sun set over the rich soil of the San Joaquin Valley.

The fading light revealed the reality of the Pascal Mystery, of death and resurrection. This life-giving power burst forth filling the space of the countryside. Perhaps only those who have really entered deeply into the Pascal Mystery can experience this.

The One who was tortured as a dangerous criminal walked through the same tiers where I had walked a few hours earlier as Sacramento once again refused to give our kids a second chance. The blood from his hands and feet dropped onto the cement floor, and ignited into a spirit of hope.

No vote, no decision can ever put out this raging fire that spread through the tiers of the prison that day. There was the realization that one day this fire will reach deep into the hearts of those who continue to refuse to give kids a second chance, with laws that deny the God whom Jesus showed. That day, his blood had burst into fire. There was hope in these brothers, even though everything seemed to be saying the opposite.

There is still hope that legislators will vote in favor of SB9 when it comes before the Assembly again in January 2012. Let us continue to work and keep this fire alive by contacting our legislators to give our young kids a second chance.

Hope.