

## **A Warrior of Light**

In his Spiritual Exercises, St. Ignatius uses the image of two kings. One is Jesus, the king of Light, who invites us all to toil with him in creating a better world; the other is the king of darkness, who through subtle temptation works to destroy it. The false glitter is enticing. However, once darkness has ensnared its prey, one sinks deeper and deeper into the trap, until the realization that one's very soul has been sold to a greater and darker power.

In California, it is no accident that some gangs make pacts with the king of darkness. On some level there really does seem to be a battle of ownership – control of the soul. Such control prompts the question: “Is there any possibility of release from the seductive, powerful, and alluring grip of this king of darkness?”

And so is born the image of the warrior of light! It is this image that has grown out of the work of the non-profit organization, Jesuit Restorative Justice Initiative (JRJI), founded by Fr. Michael Kennedy, SJ in 2009. Inspired by his belief that punishment on its own fails to address the need for healing, which benefits not only those involved in a crime, but the whole community that is also hurting.

While in Germany, on his way to an international meeting of prison chaplains in Stockholm, Father Kennedy shared a meal with a Jesuit psychologist who has worked for over twenty-five years with victims of the Second World War. During their conversation, the psychologist narrated the experience of how, when he was just eleven years old and during the invasion of Germany, he witnessed a Russian soldier raping his mother. While he can talk about it now, he has come to believe that unless we do not in some way heal, then the pain – a real consequence of violence and crime – bleeds the heart, and we die internally, before dying physically.

So often, our society wants simply to punish the perpetrator of a crime in the pursuit of vengeance and retribution. However, punishment on its own fails to recognize that the offender is also a victim, and that we are all part of the solution. As the Jesuit psychologist noted: "the healing process is not easy; it's easier to hold on to hate, to live with hate, and to be fueled by hate, but in reality...the only way to survive is to forgive."

At the international meeting of prison chaplains, there were 314 participants from 118 countries. Each

country had time to share comments about their ministry to the incarcerated. Father Kennedy recalls that when it was the United States' turn to articulate their ministry in juvenile halls, the chaplains from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and other parts of the world were in disbelief, especially when he related his recent experience at a courtroom in Los Angeles where a judge handed down a sentence of 255 years and 8 months to Eric, a youth who was just 17 years old. Asking one of the Swedish hosts, "What is it like in juvenile hall in Sweden?" she responded, "We don't have juvenile halls. We have homes, even for those who have committed the most serious crimes. We believe in rehabilitation. We invest in psychologists, schooling, and different ways to find healing for our youth."

For Father Kennedy, the current situation here in California reflects the type of attitude that the world witnessed last century during World War II. While the parallels are not identical, there are obvious similarities. As he was reminded in Germany, people knew what was happening to the Jews during the war, and yet they were too afraid to speak up. Our elected officials know what we do to our children is wrong, but are also afraid to do anything about it.

It was after representing the California Province of the Society of Jesus at the General Congregation in Rome in 2008, that Father Kennedy returned to the United States with a deep desire to participate in the healing ministry of Jesus to all those who suffer the consequences of crime: victims, offenders, their families, and their communities. He saw the need to provide some balance to this punitive and legalistic approach and offer healing and hope of forgiveness to those who are affected by violence and crime in our society. Through the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius Loyola he recognized the tool where people can start to find healing and forgiveness, and recognize that life has meaning and hope beyond the pain.

In terms of the image of the two kings, some youngsters have the power to look into the eyes of the seducer and see behind the allure of riches, power, and glory. They can see clearly where they are being led. In fact, being locked up provides time out from following the false glitter of darkness, and they begin to understand that such a lifestyle will ultimately lead them and their families to unhappiness. However, changing one's lifestyle is not easy. If you have ever imagined being someone different from the false image that you have so carefully created or what your neighborhood and peers expect, then you know that taking such a step is scary.

A few youngsters take the leap only to discover that finding their true identity is too difficult, and then

slide back to the demands and ownership of the king of darkness, once again fighting its battles. However, others make a commitment “on their palabra” to be a warrior of light, and have the strength to follow the king of Light.

As Father Kennedy notes, one of the saddest experiences working in juvenile hall is to encounter a youth who gives up after receiving a life sentence. The young person sees no alternative other than to follow the king of darkness even more intensely, or as they often say, “they are going to go all out when they hit the 'pen'.”

As we continue to give crueler and harsher sentences to youngsters, it remains important to provide survival tools for their journey. Hence, the importance of meditation and contemplative prayer. Just as adults ask serious questions, so too do young ones who are locked up. In fact, two common questions these juveniles ask are: "What does my life sentence mean for me now?" and "What will I do with my life?"

Providing these youngsters with an alternative lies at the heart of being a warrior of light. It is important to provide young people facing such a difficult journey with an image of One who was also a prisoner and felt helpless at the hands of a powerful empire. It is our hope that a person weighed down with a life sentence is able to experience life through this Risen Prisoner, who breathes life into us. One such person is Eric, who after receiving the extraordinary sentence of 255 years and 8 months stated: *“Even though I got a life sentence, I'm not going to give up and lose faith. I finally realized I was only hurting myself and others, They said I'll gang bang forever...but now I'm a warrior of light.”*

Such warriors of light living in different monastic communities of Jesus the Risen Prisoner within prisons are living proof of the life-giving power of the king of Light. One no longer follows orders that come from a place of vengeance, racism, and hate, but rather from a sense of peace and life. While this transformation is never easy, the effects are powerful.

Speaking recently with the parents of Johnny, the artist who drew the picture of Ignatius, the warrior of the Light, they tell of how their lives are so different now that their son has found peace. He is their only child, who had everything. However, he was restless and made really bad choices. Now when they visit him they notice the light in his eyes rather than the darkness that had been there for so long. This transformation has not only changed his life but also that of his parents.

Johnny saw behind the glitter of his former lifestyle. The moment came and he changed his life. Eric also had a similar moment and made the decision to change. In fact, each of us will have our moment, and our life will be shaped by the choice we make whether to embrace our true self and follow the king of Light, or stay bound in our false image and be controlled by the king of darkness.

Within these monastic communities inside prisons throughout California, the desire of a lifer to give back has been powerful. Their desire to communicate to youngsters the consequences of following the glitter of the seducer has been inspiring, as is their desire to use their time to help others. The practice of intercessory prayer becomes a real option and forms an essential part of their commitment to their monastic community in prison, as they commit to pray for the needs of those who have asked for prayers.

Father Kennedy's desire to participate in the healing ministry of Jesus, the king of Light, to all those who suffer the consequences of crime is becoming a reality. There is still much more that needs to be done, but with the tools of the Spiritual Exercises and God's grace all things are possible.

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