

Peace Presence at PBMR

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Engraving by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld, 1860.

The Scripture readings during this Easter Season are filled with such surprises for us. The disciples had dropped everything to follow Jesus. After his death, they had returned to their trades, but Jesus did not abandon them. After his resurrection, he met them in their ministry at the seashore, on their journey to Emmaus, and in their preaching, even in the prison. He is with us in our ministry as well—wherever that might be.

The timing—or was it a call—was right. I was finishing a sabbatical. Seeds were planted when I took Circle Training with Fr. Dave Kelly and Sr. Donna Liette. Then last October the Dayton Peace and Justice Office invited Fr. Dave to speak on Restorative Justice in Dayton. Sr. Donna and some of the juvenile boys came with him; I was in attendance. The next morning I went to meet with Fr. Dave and Sr. Donna at Salem Heights to find out more about their ministry at PBMR and discern if I might be a fit. The ministry at PBMR interested me, especially to be another C.P.P.S. support and presence for Sr. Donna. Being a part of a Precious Blood collaborative ministry of presence to juvenile boys was also a big draw. The redeeming love of Jesus caught my spirit and sent me forth to the south side of Chicago in the Back of the Yards to be a reconciling, life-giving presence to those that I would meet at PBMR.

I arrived last November. On my second day there, staff member Mike Donovan was held at gunpoint (which he described in last month's article). The following day, Jonathan and Lamonte, the Center's two young employees, went to pick up boxes of food from Trader Joe's. We

sorted and bagged the food, which was later given out to the homeless from the neighborhood—a weekly event.

That same evening, a Peace and Healing Mass was held at Holy Cross and Immaculate Heart of Mary Church for the families who had anyone die as a result of violence. Sister Donna and I took one of the boys from the Center with us to the service. Ushers invited us to take a white cross and inscribe the names of friends we knew who had died to violence. I asked the youth if he had lost anyone in this way. He said eight, including his brother. The experience of writing names on the cross was powerful. I could somehow relate to the grief the young 16 year-old next to me had in losing eight friends to violence last year. It boggled my mind, however, that this young individual had time to grieve, be healed and in the process forgive the offender when the tragedies occurred over and over again to friends. Many of the youth at the Center had similar stories to tell of losing friends to gun violence. I'm not sure how many have a chance to grieve, heal or forgive or if resources are made available for them to deal with their tragedies.

The next day was Juvenile Day, as Sr. Donna called it. I wondered if I would be allowed to participate on such short notice. To my surprise, I was given clearance to get into the Cook County Juvenile Detention Center, and Sr. Donna and I visited juveniles that evening. It took a little time for my heart to adjust from being with young, vibrant and focused kids at St. John the Evangelist School in Colorado, as well as the young women I had encountered in vocation work, to seeing all these young girls and boys locked up. Something seemed wrong here. What were their choices now, what happened to them in this place? I immediately looked forward to being with them again the next week. It is a privilege to encounter Christ in them—something we seek in our walk as a disciple of the risen Christ.

I have learned a lot since I came to the Precious Blood Center. Every time I drive one of the kids home from the Center, or to the bank, or even to the grocery store, I learn the importance of asking if it is safe for them to be there. Three weeks ago I was taking one of the boys to get his check cashed. On my way back to the Center, I attempted to turn down one of the side streets, but my passenger said not to turn. When I asked why, he said,

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“I don’t want rocks and stones thrown at your car.” I said I was so sorry to hear what he was telling me; it was so out of my window of life. I can go anywhere, cross any street and not have to live in fear of crossing boundaries.

The PBMR staff thought I might be gone by the end of my first week because of all that happened. I am still here months later and feel so in awe of every aspect of this mission. The boys have been so welcoming and supportive of me being in their presence. There has not been a dull moment since that first week. I came to PBMR with an open heart, to be community, work collaboratively and be a life-giving reconciling presence to the young boys and others who enter this sacred place of peace. The seed that was planted during the Circle Training in Dayton is growing in grace and knowledge of a world so different from my past experience, where life seems hopeless and yet filled with hope and Easter surprises. My heart is full of the goodness, forgiveness and mercy of God. I am blest to be in this Precious Blood collaborative ministry. “May not one drop of precious blood be shed in vain?”