

My Christmas Story

by Jeremy Pinson

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One thing I am often called by inmates is "Padre", a throwback to Catholic priests. I have never been a priest but I often do serve a role as a person who listens to the hopes, fears, and grievances of others in prison and then try to give advice or comforting words. Surprisingly in a world of extreme racial separations, inmates of all races, geographic origins and gangs confess to me everything from the mundane to secrets so dangerous my stomach turns. But I do it because I bring a small dose of comfort to men tormented by their surroundings, their family, friends, or associates, and often by the consequences of their decisions.

This Christmas day I went to the recreation cages seeking fresh air. The concrete floor was icy and the air frigid. As usual there were more people seeking to speak to me than I had the ability to speak to. But I managed to give every man a slice of my time.

The first wanted to rail against the feds for housing mentally ill inmates in a supermax resulting in an inmate housed above him banging upon his steel shower wall causing a gong-like sound to reverberate into his cell disturbing him at all hours. To make it worse the inmate above him also poured liquified

feces into the ventilation shaft filling his cell with a putrid smell. A smell that causes him discomfort and nausea. Disgusted, I could only offer him hope that his situation was not permanent.

Another inmate who is wanted dead by two powerful prison gangs expressed his fears that a mistake would be made by staff and he'd die. I urged him to inform staff in detail of his concerns and be alert and vigilant at all times. This seemed to assuage his fears which I'd heard before.

Next, a former under-boss to organized crime complained that now in his 70's he realizes much of his life was wasted and he regrets not being able to spend Christmas with his children and grandchildren. This was the most difficult thing to respond to, how do you comfort a man for whom there is no hope? For whose sins the society has judged the penalty to be even his final moments shall be spent alone in a cell? I did my best and he seemed grateful someone cared enough to listen.

Finally two inmates began to cuss one another and hurl increasingly violent and disturbing threats of violence to come. I remained silent until one of them dragged me into the dispute. Much to their dissatisfaction I took no sides and urged them to calm down and be civil if for no other reason that it is Christmas. This calmed them and then rec ended. The peak of my X-Mas 2011.