

THERE'S THE RUB

(Chapter Nine)

I was an altar boy at Saint Mary's Parish in Wrentham, Massachusetts for many years. Growing up, my mother and grandmother would laud the parish priest, Father Coffey. Actually the whole town did. So much so, that many in the congregation came from neighboring towns. But, no matter how beloved he was, I'm sure other church communities feel the same about their priest. It's a matter of preferences, opinions, likes and dislikes. Which leads me to my next story.

The Our Lady of Guadalupe community here behind the razor wire of MCI Shirley medium, in my opinion, is one of the greatest communities I have been a part of. I know...opinions are like...but I will make my claim as objectively as I can.

Most of the core group of men who make up our community are all serving long sentences. What's more is, the DOC once considered them disruptive, unruly and beyond redemption. All of us, at one point or another were in maximum-security prisons, members of gangs, spent years in solitary confinement, bought and sold drugs and was the focus of numerous DOC investigations. These same men are now leaders in the catholic community. Redemption truly is tailored made for the wretched.

We are the 41st Chapter of the International Thomas Merton Society and an official chapter of Pax Christi; both of which are the first of its kind inside of a prison. We are also the only prison where seminarians from Pope Saint John XXIII Seminary come as part of their field ministry assignment for third year theology students and as official site for Project Bread, as well as, Toys-for-Tots...the list goes on. Many of the volunteers have called this their "official Parish" and all of them say, "the presence of the Holy Spirit is more alive inside here than in outside parishes."

Of course all that could still be considered bias opinion. So let me tell you of the miracles that have been attributed to this community. In each of the following cases the person was placed in a chair and the community prays over them as music quietly plays in the background. Pat, a prisoner who suffered from eye cancer is now cancer free. Billy, who was diagnosed with stage four Glioblastoma brain cancer; an extremely aggressive form of cancer, underwent surgery to remove the tumor. Months later the tumor showed no signs of growth. Three men who "wrapped-up" their sentences have been successful in their reentry back to society. One even owns his own construction company.

Several volunteers, Barbara, Fr. Bob Rivers, Ruth and Polly suffered from some very serious medical conditions and each of them credit this community for their miraculous recoveries. But it's the one that happened on Easter Sunday of 2014, that has many of the volunteers calling it "The Easter Miracle."

Cathy has been doing prison ministry since 2005. She is a devout catholic and shares her faith with anyone who will listen—including prisoners. Yet, in spite of her positive up beat demeanor, she carried the guilt of her daughters' death for 41 years. Melissa, died of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome; otherwise known as SIDS. Although Cathy did **nothing wrong**. The questions, the second-guessing and the guilt nagged at her: like a snails trail in time. It's a feeling no parent should ever have to endure, nor, a tragedy any parent should ever face.

This past Easter Sunday we were blessed to have an Eucharistic Service along side several volunteers who came to celebrate Easter with us. During fellowship, one of the volunteers, Judy, sat off to the side and cried. If you know Judy this is not uncommon. She is a deeply emotional and spiritual being and is very special to our community and me. However, I have it on good authority that she cries eachtime the Roadrunner drops an anvil on Wiley Coyote. So, when several people asked her what was wrong, She just smiled and said, "it's nothing. I'm fine." Later that day Judy sat sown at her computer and sent the following email:

*"I wanted to share an amazing experience I had at the chapel at MCI Shirley Medium. I was sitting quietly after communion. I was looking at the tapestry with the lighthouse and the hands of God. On the right side, left hand on the tapestry, I saw a little girl. She told me she was your daughter. The little girl was very small, but very light filled. She told me to tell you Christ has risen and to share it with everyone. The most important part of the message she told me was that Christ has risen in each one of us. It seems we forget to see the risen Christ in others and ourselves. It was powerful Cathy. I'm sharing this with you at her request. What a beautiful little girl she "is".
I am sending you love my dear friend.
I am light and love and so are you." — Judy*

At first, Cathy did not know what to think of it. For 41 years she tortured herself and in the back of her mind wondered "is my daughter at peace?" How could she be sure it was Melissa that showed herself to Judy? Was it a sign from God? If so, why now? She needed something to validate this potential miracle. In the days that followed, those questions would gradually be answered in the most unlikely of ways.

The first sign came in the form of a gift. For many years Cathy wanted a certain picture of her mother. The problem; the only one taken of her resided on a nightstand next to her fathers bed. She could never bring herself to ask for it because she knew what the answer would be. So, she went without. When her father passed away, she naturally assumed she would get the photo. However, her sister in law received it and when she inquired about obtaining it she was met with opposition. Again she went without. But then, shortly after the "appearance" of Melissa, Cathy was surprised to receive the photo in the mail...41 years to the day it was taken.

The next sign came when Cathy entered the chapel here at MCI Shirley and the first thing she saw when she entered the room was a 3' x 4' puzzle hanging on the wall.

The picture depicted Jesus holding the hand of a little girl. It was new to the chapel and it was her first time seeing it. But the nature of the picture, the chapel where Melissa "appeared" in and the fact it was the first thing she saw, all had a tremendous symbolic nature that tugged at her soul. It wasn't something you just couldn't dismiss as mere "coincidence."

There were many more signs that all coincided with this miracle but she decided to stop looking and enjoy the moment. Until one of her friends; who is not religious and knew nothing of the events concerning the miracle, emailed her a prayer. She almost fell out of her chair when she saw the picture at the bottom of the page was that of the tapestry in the chapel; the lighthouse with the hands of God on either side! If someone needed further proof to substantiate whether or not this was a miracle, then I suggest they find another faith. The Holy Spirit is alive in this chapel. It is alive in this prison and in the hearts of the men who reside and worship here.

And there's the Rub. In a place where fences, security guards and razor wire is designed to keep things in, it cannot prevent God's miracles from coming in and touching those from beyond the wall.

As Told To:

Timothy J. Muise