



WHERE IS MY MAIL?

Bro. Al Ammerlaan

The mail van pulls up to the gates of the local prison, the driver waits for the guard to open the gates and he drives through to drop off the daily mail. The mail is sorted by the staff and sent out to the living units of the prison. Those living behind thick cold walls wait for this moment, as for some, the letters they may get are the only contact they have with the outside world. Mail call can also be painful for the high percentage of inmates who never receive mail.

My name is Brother Al Ammerlaan. I am presently studying for the priesthood with the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. I am very concerned for those behind bars that go without any mail at the mail call. It is out of that deep concern that I have made writing prisoners my own personal ministry, and through my correspondence with those serving time in Canada and the U.S, many inmates are now looking forward to mail call as their names are being called.

I know first hand what it means to receive mail when serving time behind prison walls. I have seen first hand the effect on those serving time of not receiving mail at mail call. I know many inmates who have gone years without receiving a letter from the outside. What a very sad feeling to realize that out in the big world there is no one that thinks about you. I have often said or written, “the crime has been committed, the courts have passed judgement and the prisoner is led off to a cell to be forgotten by society”. No mail at mail call is proof of that statement.

How do I know the pain felt by those in prison that go without mail? Allow me to explain and through my sharing you will see why I am very concerned about **MAIL CALL**.

I was brought up to know and to love God and to follow the teaching of the Catholic Church. But for one reason or another my life took on a different direction. I found myself in an addiction and I became a product of the revolving doors of the prison system. From 1977-1987, I spent eight years behind prison walls. In 1982, I gave my life to the Lord and

returned to my Catholic faith. I was released from prison on May 17, 1987. Upon my release, I drove cab in Burnaby B.C. and became involved in prison ministry. In 1992, I was able to achieve a jailhouse dream of opening a Christian Halfway House, which was named Luke 15 House Society. The house is now home to 23 men who have been released from prison.

In 1998, I started my pre novitiate year with the Oblates of Mary Immaculate and today I am in my third year of vows with the order. Also in 1998, I started my studies towards the priesthood at Newman Theological College in Edmonton. This Oct 18, I graduated with my Bachelor of Theology degree and I am presently working on ordination requirements at St Paul's University in Ottawa.

So now one can understand why I am so concern for those trapped in the revolving doors of the prison system. I was very lucky during my incarceration because I had a wonderful caring mother and a few great friends who visited and wrote me. But during my incarceration I fully realized how important it was to receive mail and know that you had a connection on the outside. In 1998 when I started my pre novitiate with the Oblates, I decided I would write a few inmates. My decision was to take on the challenge of writing those on death row in the U.S. It started off small, but over the past five years my corresponding list has grown to over 450 inmates. I write those on death row, those serving life and those serving very long sentences. Please allow me to share a few comments that I have received over the years:

“I would like to thank you for taking time out of your life to reach out to me. I pray and I thank God for people like you” Tim.

“I would be very interested in information from the classes you take or have taken” Billy.

“It is always good to know that people still care about people in prison. You have a very interesting story” Willy.

“I received your letter and let me tell you that I believe it was truly a God send. You see Brother Ammerlaan I have been praying to God and my Guardian Angel asking them to put me in touch with someone that is in the Catholic faith. When I was reading your letter that was all I was thinking about was how you were the answer to my prayers. And so I really am truly grateful that you wrote” Eric.

“I hesitate to get involved with organized religions, but I'd be interested viewing the 12 Step program” Anthony.

“You have given me a new sense of living and life, in this time of my life where society has cast me out and the people I knew as friends and family have turned their backs on me. You a stranger have reached out with pen and paper and showed me that I still exist and have a value in the world if not also in Gods plan” James.

“I really believe God has sent you for me for some purpose” Don.

“I will never disrespect your beliefs and I hope you will not do so to mine. See I too hold strong to my beliefs and as being Indian my ways in my life is down the Red Road” Tommy.

“I am more than happy we have met. Thank you for everything that you have done and that is showing me the things that I need to know, and that is getting to know God better than what I have known him. I love you for being who you are and that is a good friend and you are just not my friend but you are my brother in Christ. So thanks again and God bless you” Robert.

“I feel you are one of us, therefore I can open up and seek guidance from you” Eric.

“I do wish to express my feelings to you. I was very moved by your story and your life. For this reason I wish to correspond with you” Sean.

In my letter of introduction I tell my life story and over

the last year and a half I have enclosed a short exercise. This is an exercise that I received by e-mail; it is a square box with dots in it. Those I correspond with are asked to look at the dots for 30 seconds and then they are asked to blink their eyes and look at a white wall. The image they see is Jesus. This has been a big hit.

Recently, I received a letter from a prisoner serving a life sentence. His name is Royal. In his letter he told me he was looking for a woman to write to him. I did not fit into what he wanted and he did not plan to write me back, but when he looked at the dots and saw Jesus as clearly as he did, it was clear to him that he had to change his life. He has asked me to walk and guide him down his new path. He has asked God into his life.

These are the reasons I write those in prison. I can tell you many more stories. I can share many sad moments with you as I pray, share and love those who sit on death row waiting to die at the hands of the state. I can tell you, too, that 145 of the inmates I correspond with are doing the 12 Steps with me through the mail, that many of these inmates are seeking knowledge and I am providing them with photocopies of things from my classes. Many of my correspondents have been able to open up at a very deep level through my communicating with them. I thank God daily for the gift he has given me to help those behind bars.

After reading this article and you feel called to write those in prison please contact me and I will match you with an inmate, just waiting to hear from you.

If you have any 80 or 49-cent stamps sitting around doing nothing, I know where they could be well used.

If you have any questions, please feel free to write me at:

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