

Courtesy of Dcn. R Rosenbaum

The retreats in prison lead to life-changing encounters with Christ.

A KOLBE RETREAT IN THE MCCONNELL UNIT

Brotherhood found behind bars

BY ALEX DERISE

For many of us, the idea that we would come to prison to find brotherhood and a sense of belonging seemed completely far-fetched. Little did any of us know that the power of a retreat could change our lives forever: the Kolbe retreat at McConnell Unit, similar to an ACTS retreat.

It starts on Thursday morning. Retreatants, known as pilgrims of all faiths, are taken into a gymnasium that is normally dull, drab, and chilly. It has been transformed into something that will help take our hearts and minds out of this place.

The normal head nods and hand slaps we use to greet each other are replaced by hugs from all the free-world volunteers and inmates helping out. Some of us haven't been hugged in years and feel a bit uncomfortable.

We are divided into groups and seated at various tables. For the next three days, these groups become our families. Each table group is named after a saint. Meals are shared throughout the day, featuring food not normally seen behind prison walls. I have witnessed people who would normally not speak to one another become close friends when seated at the same table. Over the next three days, many talks and testimonies will be given about Christ's love.

Several skits provide entertainment while illustrating key tenets of the Catholic faith, including the seven sacraments, the Mass, and the practice of praying the Rosary; they also clarify how we venerate the saints and do not worship our Blessed Mother Mary.

About half of the pilgrims attending the retreat are not Catholic, and these talks and skits help clarify many misconceptions they may have about the Catholic faith.

By the third and final day of the retreat, those who arrived feeling uncomfortable with hugs are doling them out as they arrive in the morning. All of us, from pilgrims to inside and outside volunteers, have become a Kolbe family.

Some of the people here never receive outside visits, so for these volunteers to take time from their daily lives to come, show us Christ's love, help teach the faith, embrace us as brothers, and care about our salvation is a true blessing. The fact that these volunteers act on Matthew 25:36, "I was in prison, and you came to visit me," is not something any of us take lightly. We give those volunteers our utmost respect and love.

The sense of camaraderie and brotherhood doesn't have to end on the last day of the retreat. Pilgrims are invited to join an OCIA catechesis class. Furthermore, once a month, we hold a Kolbe reunion, in which all previous attendees of a Kolbe Retreat are invited to share in worship, teaching, and fellowship.

Witnessing this transformation is a true blessing. The sense of belonging that some of us have experienced for the first time is a wonderful feeling. The love of Christ has been shown to all, and seeds have been planted for the Holy Spirit to water.

If you feel called to assist in any way in this wonderful ministry, please contact Deacon Roger Rosenbaum at Our Lady of Victory Catholic Church in Beeville, Texas. We look forward to seeing you and welcoming you into our community.

Saint Maximilian Kolbe, pray for us.