



Ashes to Ashes ---- Embers to Life

by Oblate Michael Wiese

Director's Note: Mr. Wiese made his oblation in 2014 at the Christ Our Light chapel in the Luther Unit of the prison in Navasota, Texas. He is very active in prison ministry, from within. I asked him to write something about his work there with the other inmates. What follows is his inspirational plea for more folks to get involved in this ministry.

There is a gym, outside a small town, which is in the middle of nowhere. It is a Saturday morning. Natural light floods in through the high windows, yet it is a dimly-lit place. As I walk the concrete basketball court, I stare at the colorful markings on the floor, and anticipation builds.

Suddenly, men pour through the large double doors and the once silent place erupts in sound. They are the sounds of chairs being set, speakers being tested, the sounds which proclaim, "Do not delay. Hurry. Jesus will be here soon!"

My name is Michael Wiese and I am many things. First and foremost, I am a child of God and a faithful Catholic man. I am a son, a father, a catechist, and an Oblate of St. Benedict. I am also a prisoner. I am a man who has been to the lowest places a person can go, yet I have been redeemed, by the grace of God, and brought to heights I could never have imagined. And I am not alone. I am surrounded by an entire community of Catholic men just like me.

Try to imagine a Catholic community where everyone knows everyone. Imagine a community where everyone uses their gifts for the greater good of the group. Where every person pitches in, encourages, and helps each other. A place where the strong in faith lift up the weak and the weak accept the help of the strong. Sounds pretty awesome, doesn't it? Well, I am writing from a community just like that—St. John Paul II Catholic Mission, we call ourselves.

We have a community of 50-60 men who attend services every week without fail. We usher 10-14 new members into the Catholic Church each Pentecost. We live our Catholic faith in the face of some pretty harsh conditions, and yet we remain steadfast and faithful. We remain an example to the 1200 other men who live around us, who search, with pleading eyes, for a hope which will not fail them. If

only I could show you just how dim the ember of hope is, behind some of these men's eyes. It is hard to look into those eyes, knowing that God wants nothing more than to gently blow that ember into a flame, and then to fan that flame, so that it catches the world on fire.

Could God be calling you to fan such an ember? Before you shake your head at the very idea, I would like to introduce you to a few members of our community. You see, I haven't always been in prison, and I know the pictures that flit through the mind whenever prison or prisoners are spoken about. May I paint another picture for you? A picture that God Himself has wrought with the brush of his infinite mercy.

Picture a man named Lance Palermo, who works as a mentor in the faith-based dorm, a man who is just a few semesters away from earning his Bachelor in Theology from the Catholic Distance University, a man who aspires to the priesthood. What of Thuan Vu? The picture of this man shows an author who is expecting *A Catholic Heart* to be out soon. (I was privileged to write a commentary for his book.) Thuan is a man with a child-like love for those around him. Then there is David DelToro, who has been a fierce advocate for our Spanish-speaking Catholics. Thomas Anderson-Hatfield runs our sound board and is a Board member for our Brothers of St. Dismas Fraternity. As for myself, I teach RCIA, write Catholic fiction, and I work with the chaplain daily, for the betterment of all the faith communities on the unit.

Although we are all different men with separate gifts, we have all come to the same understanding. We all understand that there is something beautiful about being broken and refashioned into a new creation. There is something staggering about being completely emptied out, so that God can stretch you to your very limit, simply for the purpose of pouring even more love and grace into the person you are becoming.

Now, don't everyone jump into your car and drive to the Luther Unit in Navasota, Texas. The fact is that there are over two million people incarcerated in the United States. There are hundreds and hundreds of prisons spread out across every state in the country. That doesn't include the county jails where men await sentencing. Most of these places do not have a community like ours. We men of St. John Paul II Catholic Mission are living proof that a volunteer, plus God's grace, equals the salvation of many. Maybe you've thought about it before—finding a mission field. Maybe you've looked for a group of the "least ones" or to assist a small faith community. If so, you do not have to look far. We live in your backyards, and we wait in hope that you will spend one day a month to bring the Body of Christ to us.

"Okay, okay," you may say. "Maybe this is a ministry I could do, but, well, it's a little frightening." Don't feel alone in this. We were all frightened the first time we entered a prison. Our hearts pounded, our adrenaline pumped, and our fight-or-flight reflex caused havoc in our minds. Remember that part about being stretched to the limit? You will be stretched, but the rewards will be so overwhelming that it will shock you. Just ask Deacon Walter Busa, Steve Goodman, and Larry Reeh. They are all involved in the prison ministry here, and they go so far as to claim that they long for their time with us!

Now, what do you need to do to get started? First, you will need to go to God in prayer. Ask for strength, determination, and a spirit of forgiveness. Like every ministry, prison ministry has its own set of challenges. There will be training sessions to attend, you will have to go through a background check, and you will have to be patient each time in getting into the unit. To get started, call the Chaplaincy Department for the state where you live, and they will help you. Remember you have to be determined! Each diocese also has its own Prison Ministry Office. You may also go to the websites for A.C.T.S. Prison, Bridges to Life, Kolbe Retreats, St. Dismas Brothers, or Kairos, to name just a few. All of these would be happy to assist you.

Now, back to the gym turned into a Catholic Church. Again the space is silent, except this time there are 55 men on their knees, watching as the priest lifts our Lord and Savior up, broken for me, and

says, "Behold, behold Him who takes away the sins of the world. Happy are those called to the wedding feast of the Lamb." And I can say, without a doubt in my heart, "Truly, Lord, I above all am not worthy to have you under my roof, but simply because you said so, my soul is healed."