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## **“Will you come back?”**

"My husband and I had no idea that we were about to experience the best Christmas of our lives," says Pilar Caranti, a mother of six from Houston, Texas who regularly visits a high security prison with her husband.

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Our children were not able to fly home before Christmas because of an unexpected snowstorm, and we

decided to visit a maximum-security prison in the city near our ranch.

We went with Robert, a communion minister from the parish in Huntsville who visits this prison three times a week. We thought that the visit would be an hour and a half, but when we entered, we learned that it would last all afternoon. I thought, “There is no way I’m going to spend every Sunday visiting prisoners. Once in a while is quite enough.” I didn’t know what an impact seeing the world of humanity behind bars – persons, children of God – would have on our hearts.

We started with a tour that ended in a large chapel, transformed into a place of worship by inmates like Brady. There, we met Tim, Keith, Juan, Chad, Brady, Marco, Alan, Sebastian, and others, learning about their backgrounds, journeys toward the Catholic faith, and the challenges

they faced "in there." Some worked in prison factories, crafting highway signs, license plates, or mattresses for state universities. Others do carpentry or learn different trades, and some study to finish high school or complete university degrees.

One impactful moment occurred during an apologetics class led by Tim, an inmate and a convert to Catholicism. He proudly showcased items purchased with funds raised among themselves—candlesticks, a crucifix, and more, to replace older ones. They hadn't had enough to buy a new Monstrance to replace the wooden one and I promised to get them one.

The day continued with a bilingual service, led by inmates without a priest. Despite the absence of traditional elements, the atmosphere was reverent and complete. Robert, along with four altar boys selected

from among the inmates, led the congregation, singing hymns and guiding prayers. The “Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us” resonated loudly, and I couldn’t help but cry. It was very powerful. I no longer pray like I used to. Now I pray each word more thoughtfully and I truly ask God for forgiveness during that part of the liturgy.

Before the final song, Tim took the microphone and told them about my reaction, saying, “She will go outside, and she will tell everyone what she saw.” True to his words, I have since told friends, family, and acquaintances about what we experienced that Christmas. Many of them are moved to tears. One of my friends told me that she no longer attends Mass in the same way after hearing about it. After the story, most people decide to pray for prisoners.

When we said goodbye, the inmates thanked us for coming and asked two questions: “Have you seen that we’re not so bad?” and “Will you come back?” Without realizing it, we had validated, recognized and affirmed those men. We now saw them as men with dignity, in need of affection and mercy.

And the six hours we spent there were enough to change my initial reluctance into eagerness to come back.

Since that transformative Christmas, we pray for each of them every day. As always, we received much more than we gave, and our hearts grew larger because we carry their names and stories with us.

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