

## **WE ARE NOT ALONE IN SUFFERING**

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by José Luis Pérez Guadalupe

*And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.*

(Matthew 28:20)

In recent years, following our world meeting of IPCA in South Africa, I visited some Latin America chaplains to take an interest not only in the prisons and inmates but also in the chaplains themselves.

It was interesting to find out about different situations, different penitentiary systems, different chaplains and different pastoral styles. The common denominator in most of the Latin American prisons was that these chaplains were doing very dedicated work with the inmates, despite shortages and difficulties. Chaplains also shared with the inmates society's ignorance of what went on in other prisons and, of course, of the pastoral work done there. Some chaplains felt ignored by their churches. Just as the prisoners were the forgotten people of society, the prison chaplains were often forgotten by the church.

Some years ago, a prison chaplain whom I met at the meeting in Kroonstad, South Africa, visited me in Lima, my city. We went to Lurigancho Prison where I do pastoral work. We shared our experiences with very similar situations, like working in two Latin American megaprisons. Some months later, I went to his country and was able to visit him and see where he worked. I experienced his work first-hand: there were two full-time chaplains for a prison with over 3,000 inmates. I shared his struggles and his satisfactions in sometimes very thankless work. We prayed together and shared the *hope* in this work that the Lord had entrusted to him.

Soon after, I learned that this chaplain had given up the ministry and left his congregation. I wondered, 'What happened to this friend of mine and his vocation? What happened to his years of work as a prison chaplain? What happened to his dreams and plans? And what happened to him?' I started to think that maybe he felt alone in his ministry, maybe he felt abandoned by his colleagues, maybe he felt abandoned by his church. Then I realised that the message that WE ARE NOT ALONE was not only valid and urgent for the

inmates to whom we give pastoral care, but also and especially for us as prison chaplains. I realised that often in our pastoral work we devote ourselves wholly to the inmates but at times forget about ourselves. Therefore it is very important to be together and to share with fellow workers the responsibility that God has entrusted to us. It is equally important and necessary NOT TO FEEL ALONE because we ourselves must live out what we tell the prisoners.

But I also started to think that we as prison chaplains to some extent share with inmates this same feeling of being alone and abandoned, not only by society but also within our ministry and at times in our own church. This may be because the only way to heed the advice of the author of the Letter to the Hebrews to ‘Be mindful of prisoners as if sharing their imprisonment’ (Hebrews 13:3) is by sharing with the inmates themselves these feelings of being passed over and isolated. We cannot be with prisoners without sharing their suffering and making it ours as well; we can only redeem a situation if we take it upon ourselves. The Church Fathers said that what is not actually lived is not redeemed. Saint Irenaeus emphasised that the Lord would not have taken these things on Himself unless He had become flesh and blood — thus saving at last what had at first perished with Adam (*Adversus Haereses* V–14,1). If Christ Himself had to become human to redeem humanity, how much more do we have to take on the suffering of prisoners to redeem them from their loneliness and share this Christian promise that THE LORD WILL BE WITH US ALWAYS UNTIL THE END OF TIME (Matthew 28:20).

Almost a century ago, the great Spanish writer Miguel de Unamuno (1864–1936) paraphrased a text by Terence (190–159 BC):

*‘Homo sum; nihil humani a me alienum puto’*, Terence said I am a man, and nothing human is foreign to me. I would go further and say *‘Homo sum; nullum hominem a me alienum puto’* (I am a man and I consider no other man to be a foreigner). Because for me the adjective ‘human’ is as suspect as the abstract noun ‘humanity,’ I would avoid using the adjective ‘human’ and the abstract noun ‘humanity’ and use only the concrete noun: man [or woman]. Man is flesh and blood, is born, suffers and dies, especially dies, eats and drinks and plays and sleeps and thinks and desires, man who can be seen and heard, a brother, a real fellow human.’ (From *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida* [The Tragic Sense of Life], (1913)

Therefore, for this specific man or woman, Jesus was born, for this specific man or woman who suffers and dies, as Unamuno says, for this specific man or woman who feels alone, and alone in suffering. He was also born for us chaplains, who often feel alone in suffering as well, in our suffering and the suffering of others, of the prisoners.

Recalling why my friend the prison chaplain gave up his ministry, I understood that it was impossible to do work in the real world and not also be affected by the concrete situation of these specific people, as Jesus was. We cannot do superficial work in which we cannot feel their suffering. In any case, it is completely normal to feel alone if we work in prison. But at the same time I understood that if we did not live out the Lord's promise, we could never share it with others. If we ourselves do not experience God's presence and closeness, we will never be able to communicate this God who became flesh to be with us. If we are not close to God and do not let Him be near us, we cannot say to ourselves and to prisoners that WE ARE NOT ALONE.

In the lovely passage on the disciples at Emmaus (Luke 24:13–33), we see this teaching. We see that the disciples were sorrowful and grieving because their hopes concerning the Messiah had disappeared along with Jesus. They were walking disconsolate — though Jesus Himself was with them, they did not recognise Him. As Luke tells us, Jesus first approached, then walked with them, then revealed Himself and asked them some questions, and finally He read the Scripture to them, but the disciples at Emmaus did not recognise Him because something prevented them (Luke 24:16). What prevented them from recognising Him was precisely their suffering and sorrow over Jesus' death. Often we cannot see Jesus because we are hurt and caught up in our own suffering, and this suffering keeps us from recognising Jesus. Often prisoners cannot see Jesus because their personal suffering is so great that it overwhelms them. Therefore it is important to believe in His promise and to share with them that WE ARE NOT ALONE, because only then can we 'recognise Jesus,' invite Him into our home, sit with Him at our table and share the bread of life.

A few months ago there was an uprising in Lurigancho Prison where I work in Lima. This prison was built to house 1,800 people and now has nearly 9,000 inmates. Inside the prison is a veritable city in which prisoners practically run the institution and administer it; they have guns to enforce

order in their wings. Most of the inmates started their career in crime at the age of eight or ten (as street children). They have been in prison several times and crime is a regular part of their lives. The prisoners have to buy their cells and band together, not according to the type of crime that they committed but on the basis of their geographic origin. The prisoners have their own leaders who run their own wings of the prison, and there is a constant struggle to control the drug trade inside.

Early this year, with the ongoing conflict among the various gangs, a fight between two wings led to an uprising throughout the prison. When we were notified, the bishop with whom I work, went with me immediately to the jail to try to help pacify the situation as much as we could. After arguing with the authorities for a long time, we were finally allowed into the prison. We could still hear the police firing shots to control the revolt; the tear gas forced us back from time to time. Once the situation was under control, they started to bring the injured to where we were. They brought out over 25 injured people to be rushed to the nearest hospital, and some other injured people were treated in the prison hospital. Then the bodies of five dead prisoners were taken out. Like the injured, they had been shot, but not by the police. They were shot with weapons used by the inmates themselves inside the prison.

The situation kept getting worse because the small amount of medicine in the prison ran out and there were not enough ambulances to take all the injured. We immediately obtained medicine and serum from our churches but it was not sufficient. There were moments of great tension, anguish and pain for the injured who were bleeding and helpless. The bishop tried to talk with the wounded, to say something to encourage them, but some were already unconscious. In this situation, I wondered how I could talk about God in times of such great suffering, how could I tell the injured that **THEY ARE NOT ALONE**, even though with many people around them, they felt really alone and abandoned in their suffering. Finally, I wondered where God was then, and in fact I must confess that in such circumstances, I found it very hard to give a credible answer.

At that time, I recalled the letters of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who wrote from prison (*Letters and Writings from Prison*); but I especially recalled the testimony of Elie Wiesel (*Night*, 1958), a Jew who survived the Holocaust. He wondered after so much suffering and pain in the Nazi concentration

camps: Where was God when thousands of prisoners were in those concentration camps? Where was God when so many people were burning in the crematoria of Auschwitz? And Wiesel replied: 'God was in those concentration camps; God was in those crematoria.'

Then, after seeing the dead and injured in Lurigancho Prison and again wondering where God was, I could answer IN FAITH with the same words of that wise Jew: 'God was in Lurigancho Prison, God was there behind bars, God was with those injured and dead.' But how hard it is to say to an inmate who is about to die that HE IS NOT ALONE. How hard it is to say to a prison chaplain who has just given up his ministry that HE IS NOT ALONE. How hard it is to tell ourselves in our tribulations that WE ARE NOT ALONE. **IT IS DIFFICULT BUT NECESSARY, since that is precisely our Mission as prison chaplains:** To fulfil the promise of EMMANUEL, GOD WITH US, and to proclaim, even from our own human solitude and suffering and pain, that WE ARE NOT ALONE.

And to transmit this conviction that WE ARE NOT ALONE in a place like a prison where everything seems to say the opposite is precisely our task: TO LIVE AND TO TRANSMIT TO PRISONERS, THEIR FAMILIES, VICTIMS, AND OURSELVES AS CHAPLAINS, THE MESSAGE THAT WE ARE NOT ALONE. **This is the great ministry to which God has called us.**

When things are going well, it is easy and comfortable to talk about God and to believe in His promises; but it is difficult to TAKE IT ON FAITH, which is evidence of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1). I could tell you about glorious moments from 20 years of pastoral work in Lurigancho Prison, times when the pastoral workers and prisoners really felt the Lord's presence; I could tell you a thousand stories and testimonies of conversions and family reunions in the prison, but I believe that it is not just about that. It is about HOW TO SPEAK OF GOD IN A PLACE WHERE GOD'S PRESENCE IS NOT FELT, HOW TO BELIEVE THAT WE ARE NOT ALONE WHEN WE FEEL AND LIVE THIS SOLITUDE. This is what it is about, colleagues.

Each of you may have a pastoral experience like or unlike mine, but certainly all of us here have the same challenge: TO MAKE REAL IN EVERY PARTICULAR SITUATION THIS PROMISE OF THE LORD, WHO TELLS US THAT HE WILL BE WITH US ALWAYS UNTIL THE END OF TIME.

To carry out this task, we do not need to invent or create a new gospel; we already have Jesus, the Great Word of God. We have Jesus, our great exemplar, our great master, our great chaplain, who made and fulfils the promise. Because our gospel is JESUS CHRIST.

The great German theologian Romano Guardini (1885–1968) expressed this truth very well, when inquiring about the essence of Christianity. He advocated a personal God, and finally pleaded for the specific uniqueness not of the human or of humanity but of each person (along the same lines as Miguel de Unamuno whom we mentioned previously):

‘What is particular about Christianity cannot be deduced from earthly precepts or expressed in purely natural categories, because that denies its essence. [...]

Ultimately, Christianity is neither a doctrine of truth nor an interpretation of life. It is those things but they are not its essence. *Its essence is Jesus of Nazareth*, his life, work and destiny; that is, it is based on a historic personality. [...] For him, what is important is not humanity or human nature at large but this specific *person*.’

Therefore, for us, our God is this Jesus of Nazareth, this God incarnate who became one of us, this God who became a person to meet us in a personal encounter: **this is our God**. This God, as Pascal would say, ‘is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob; He is not the God of the philosophers or of the sages, but the God of Jesus Christ.’

If we re-read the first chapter of John’s Gospel, we see in summary form much of the Theology of the Incarnation, which is the basis of our faith in Christ, very God and very man. ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God’ (John 1:1), but this Word becomes a reality for us, it lives in our lives: IT IS INCARNATE. ‘And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us’ (John 1:14). God became human, this Jesus ‘Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.’ (Philippians 2:6–8). Therefore, our God is EMMANUEL, not in a figurative sense but in the most real way possible, in the INCARNATION. This incarnation is so real and His presence is so real in us that Jesus became ‘one who has similarly been tested in every way, yet is without sin’ (Hebrews 4:15).

Nevertheless, we see that this Jesus who was incarnated for us was not necessarily well received and accepted; rather, when he came, he was born in a manger in a stable. 'He came to what was his own, but his own people did not accept him' (John 1:12). In His ministry, there were really few moments of glory for Jesus, who was surrounded by multitudes who followed Him unconditionally. The people of Jesus' time had the image of the Jewish Messiah, the victorious and reigning saviour, but Jesus did not correspond to that image. Certainly, the Jewish Messiah did not match the Christian saviour. Rather, Jesus conveyed the image of a humble, modest God, who from earth, from simple reality, promises us His kingdom which is not of this world. If you like, it is the image of a 'losing' God, abandoned, imprisoned, judged, sentenced, condemned to death and executed. It is the image and reality of a God who suffers, but from His suffering, His 'defeat,' His death, moves forward and rewards us with His victory: ETERNAL LIFE. Only this God who becomes a man and dies on a cross can rise again. He is the only one who can give us eternal life, through His sacrifice.

That is precisely why we can believe the Lord's promise that HE WILL BE WITH US UNTIL THE END OF TIME. Because we have a credible God, a reliable God, a God who does what He says, who keeps His promise. And this promise of Jesus has its meaning from His incarnation and death, but especially from His RESURRECTION. We can rely on a God who keeps His promise; we can rely on a God who became flesh and who suffers for us and with us; we can rely on a God who dies on a cross; we can rely on a God who rises again and will make us all rise again. Therefore, the fulfilment of His promise is assured.

This promise of Jesus still stands and is valid, even when we **are alone**, even when we **feel alone**; for it is one thing to **be alone** and something quite different to **feel alone**.

If we go over Jesus' life, we can see that during His ministry the Lord was often alone, as the four Gospels tell us. We can take only one example from each Gospel:

Matthew 14:23 After doing so, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When it was evening he was there alone.

Mark 4:10 And when he was alone, those present along with the Twelve questioned him about the parables.

Luke 9:18 Once when Jesus was praying in solitude, and the disciples were with him, he asked them, ‘Who do the crowds say that I am?’

John 6:15 Since Jesus knew that they were going to come and carry him off to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain alone.

At these four different moments which the Gospels relate, we see that *Jesus decides to be alone*, basically to pray with His Father. We can also find other passages in the Bible in which Jesus is alone (especially to pray), and Jesus Himself even tells us: ‘But when you pray, go to your inner room, close the door (i.e. be alone) and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you.’ (Matthew 6:6)

And we too at some times need to be alone, be it to pray or to meditate on His Word or to be by ourselves, etc. Solitude in itself is not necessarily bad; although we can *be* alone, we do not necessarily *feel* alone. In another passage from the Gospel, John tells us that Jesus said to His disciples: ‘Behold, the hour is coming and has arrived when each of you will be scattered to his own home and you will leave me alone. But I am not alone, because the Father is with me.’ (John 16:32) As we can appreciate, *Jesus was alone but did not feel alone*.

But there were times in Our Lord’s life (and also in our own lives) when *Jesus did not decide to be alone, but circumstances forced him not only to be alone but also to feel alone*. What is more, at a crucial time in His life, on the Cross, Jesus felt alone, he felt abandoned, not only by His friends but even by His own Father.

At noon darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.

And about three o’clock Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?*’ which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ (Mark 15:34; Matthew 27:46)

How hard and tough it must have been for Jesus to feel that way! Not only the physical abandonment, the solitude among so many people, the suffering in His mission, but also the feeling of being abandoned by His own Father, which leads Him to repeat the first verse of Psalm 22: ‘My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?’

Here we see a God who shares with us not only human nature in the abstract but all that it implies, specifically, human frailty. A God who feels suffering, who feels loneliness, who feels abandoned, and who *feels alone in this suffering*. Only a God who understands our nature and our pain can save us and pull us through; only a God who is so committed to us that He will suffer to death has the authority to tell us that **WE ARE NOT ALONE**. And by analogy, we can also say that **ONLY IF WE AS PRISON CHAPLAINS SHARE THE INMATES' SOLITUDE AND SUFFERING WILL WE BE ABLE TO TELL THEM WITH THE SAME AUTHORITY AS JESUS THAT THEY ARE NOT ALONE**.

And strangely, when Jesus was most alone and abandoned, on the Cross, the person who was with Jesus in His suffering and sharing His fate was precisely a prisoner, a criminal, someone sentenced to death like Him. The paradoxes of life, that a confessed criminal and convict, a sinner, should be the only one to whom Jesus promised Paradise immediately: 'Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.' (Luke 23:43).

But (A) Jesus' story does not end with His death on the Cross, (B) nor does Psalm 22 end with the lament that Jesus evoked before He died, (C) nor does the story of Lurigancho Prison, which I told you earlier, end with the prisoners' uprising that took some lives.

(A) Jesus' life does not end with His death on the Cross; rather, Jesus rose again for us all. There is hope in Jesus, not only because He is a God who dies for us, but also because He is a God who rises again for us. As Saint Paul says, 'if Christ has not been raised, your faith is vain' (I Corinthians 15:16)

**The message** for us now is the same as it was 2000 years ago when the angel told the women who had gone to anoint Jesus' body in the tomb:

Do not be amazed! You seek Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified.

He has been raised; he is not here. (Mark 16:6)

In Luke's version, the angel asked the women: 'Why do you seek the living one among the dead? He is not here, but he has been raised.' (Luke 24:5-6)

**The promise** for us is the same as the one that Jesus gave to His disciples after His resurrection: 'And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age. Amen.' (Matthew 28:20). We have the assurance that Our Lord will

fulfil His promise, because, as it says in Joshua 23:14, ‘So now acknowledge with your whole heart and soul that not one of all the promises the LORD, your God, made to you has remained unfulfilled. Every promise has been fulfilled for you, with not one single exception.’

**(B)** Also, Psalm 22 does not end with the cry ‘My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?’ Instead, it continues with the psalmist saying:

Why so far from my call for help, from my cries of anguish? My God, I call by day, but you do not answer; by night, but I have no relief.

Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the glory of Israel.

In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted and you rescued them.

To you they cried out and they escaped; in you they trusted and were not disappointed. (Psalm 22:1–6)

And so it continues throughout the Psalm.

**(C)** Finally, the story of Lurigancho Prison does not end with five dead and 25 injured. The following week, the same prisoners wanted to surrender their weapons as a peace gesture. For this, they called the bishop who was with them when they needed him most, and the inmates gave him their weapons: a rifle, a machine gun, ten pistols, eight revolvers and seven grenades. (And since then, thank God, there have been no more major internal disturbances.) Did the prisoners give up all their weapons? Of course not. Are the internal conflicts in Lurigancho Prison over? Certainly not. But at least something could be done; at least a very evil reality could be made less bad. At least the inmates knew that they could trust someone: the chaplain, the bishop, the church. At least the prisoners could personally experience that **THEY WERE NOT ALONE**.

We cannot prevent everyone’s suffering, but at least we can tell them with conviction and from our own experience that **THEY ARE NOT ALONE IN SUFFERING**. That is what I believe it is about, colleagues, to do what we have to do in the place where we happen to work. The rest is in the hands of God. We must remain faithful to our calling and to our mission, because often not only are we alone but we also feel alone. The rest is God’s work, not ours.

Therefore I wish to conclude with some wise words attributed to Msgr. Oscar Romero, as we commemorate the 25th anniversary of his martyrdom in El Salvador this year. Msgr. Romero said:

It is good that from time to time  
We stop and look at the whole picture.  
The Kingdom of God is not only beyond our efforts  
But is also beyond our vision.

Throughout our life we do only a very small part  
Of this magnificent enterprise which is God's work.  
Nothing that we do is complete,  
Which is another way of saying that the  
Kingdom is far beyond us.

No statement expresses all that could be said.  
No prayer fully expresses our faith.  
No confession brings us to perfection.  
No pastoral visit brings us fulfilment.  
No program totally fulfils the Church's mission  
No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

And that is precisely the point:  
We plant the seeds that will one day grow.  
We water the seeds that were planted by others  
Knowing that they hold a promise for the future.  
We lay the foundations for what will come after.  
We provide the leavening that will have an effect  
beyond what we alone can do.

Certainly, we cannot do it all, and when we realise that,  
We feel a certain freedom.

It enables us to do something, but to do it well.  
It may not be complete, but it is a start.  
One more step, one more opportunity for  
the Grace of God to enter and do the rest.  
Perhaps we shall never see the final result of our work,

But that is the difference between the master of  
the work and the worker.

We are workers, not the Master of the Work;  
We are ministers, but not the Messiah.  
We may be prophets, but of a future that  
does not belong to us.'

Thank you very much and may God bless you all.

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