

CONVERSATIO MORUM

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Thoughts for a Monday Morning

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DOGS AND RATS AND SNAKES

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A stench of human misery permeated the seriously overcrowded prison. Although it had originally been designed to hold a maximum of 1500 prisoners, there were nearly four times that many being held on the day I visited. The fact of violence, disease, and daily bloodshed didn't surprise me even though it was my first such face-to-face encounter with man's inhumanity to man in the name of justice.

As I walked across the stifling prison yard with the prison director, a mangy looking dog approached us, evidently looking for a scrap of food or a bit of attention. "And how many dogs do you have in here?" I asked somewhat offhandedly, trying to make conversation with a man who was clearly not as keen about my visit as I was. "Five thousand eight hundred," he responded without hesitation – "I have five thousand eight hundred dogs in here, they are animals!"

Taken aback by the director's intensity and demeaning response, I chose not to pursue that line of conversation. However, during the rest of my tour through the prison I made a point of stopping at each cell to speak with the men inside. They weren't dogs, they were human beings and even as the director became increasingly impatient and irritated with my frequent stops, I was determined to recognize "his dogs" with dignity and respect.

"Sticks and stones may break my bones – but names will never hurt me" goes the little schoolyard ditty by which we learned to counter the insults of petty troublemakers and bullies. I always assumed there was a certain truth in that saying, but I've come to understand that name-calling causes wounds that go far deeper than physical bruises or broken bones. As I spoke with those prisoners that day, and as I continue to speak with men and women in prisons around the world, I meet those who are so demeaned and beaten down by dehumanising labels – "delinquent," "trash," "good-for-nothing," "loser," "slut," "air-head," "jackass," "snake," "fag," "hopeless case," "bastard," – that they've lost their sense of worth and self-respect as beings created in the image of God.

Arguably, many of these men and women have behaved in ways that neither reflect human decency and dignity nor engender social respectability. Yet, none the less, they are fully human beings and not animals or any of the other things by which they are so easily and dismissively labelled. Little by little the names and the labels stick, adding injury to insult thereby destroying instead of healing and redeeming.

During a recent visit to Peru, I noticed that the national news media was preoccupied with a political scandal involving a former government minister who had become a lobbyist for foreign oil interests. "Romulo the Rat" proclaimed the headline of one daily paper, graphically depicting the head of Mr. Romulo imposed on the body of a large sewer rat. I understand the sentiments, yet whether or not Mr. Romulo's alleged actions are despicable and dishonourable does not equate or reduce him to being rat. And while people are furious about his apparently underhanded dealings, he is still a human being –

beloved by the same God who gave him life – made in the image of God. So how can he or anyone dismissively or derogatorily reduce him to being a “rat” when God made him a man?

The current election campaign in the United States is similarly rife with name-calling and labelling. As the political passions of people become increasingly polarized and emotional, the rhetoric used by supporters on each side dehumanizes and even begins dehumanises the chief candidates on the other side. “He’s a real snake, that one – it’ll be the end of this country if he gets elected,” a man told me and then went on to intimate that the candidate of the other party was a faker and in league with the devil.

Yet in politics as in prisons, amid the good the bad and the ugly realities of life, neither we, nor those we do not like or trust, are dogs or rats or snakes or anything other than the beloved children of a merciful and loving God. It is all too easy too judge, name or treat another person who offends us as being less than human – but to do so wounds and violates both them and the One who gives them life.

God sent Jesus into the world not to condemn or demean the world but graciously and mercifully to lift people up to the Father. To be followers of Jesus means that we join him in lifting people up and so we go into the pubs and prisons; we go into the marketplaces of commerce and politics; we go into the highways and byways of life to share hope and light and life – to lift people up, not to put them down as the culture all around us does even when they do it to themselves.

*You have heard that our forefathers were told
do not commit murder;
Anyone who commits murder must be brought to justice.
But what I tell you is this;
Anyone who nurses anger against his brother must be brought to justice,
anyone who calls his brother “good for nothing”
deserves the sentence of the court;
whoever calls him a “fool”
deserves hell-fire...*

You have heard...
“Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.”
But what I tell you is this;
Love your enemies and pray for your persecutors;
only so can you be children of your heavenly Father,
who causes the sun to rise on good and bad alike,
and sends the rain on the innocent and the wicked.
(St. Matthew 5:21, 22, 43-45 REB)

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