

Prison Is All I Know¹

William did not mind going back to prison on a seven-and-a-half to fifteen-year sentence! “Prison is all I know and those years previous had not impacted me.” His long-term friend Joan was by his side now, nourishing the wound, visiting, caring, loving. She brought her small children to visit him and offered him his first real family relationships. Carol had said to him, as they were taking him up to Clinton again, “It’s all over between us. Be a man. Be strong.” Joan was always there. She seemed his ideal, they knew each other since childhood, when her family had treated him as one of them. Joan brought his younger brother to Clinton for a visit at length. When he was sent to Arthur Kill, in Staten Island, she would visit almost every day. During a winter blizzard, she walked all the way to see him. She was the only visitor at the prison that day. They decided to get married.

Joan has helped William with his motivation. He has been struggling with his sense of identity, with his sense of belonging, with the apathy not uncommon in prisons, with the eternal “racial put-down,” and with his lack of adequate education. He has come a long way during this “bid.” He has been in for most of his minimum sentence and hopes to be released on parole within eight months. When he was “hit” by the Parole Board with two years, he renewed his efforts to overcome depression and forge forward in his work with the Pre-Release Educational Program. He hopes to work towards the betterment of the Correctional System from outside the wall. I believe he has made a courageous effort from inside!

William’s story is painful. His life has endured over thirty years of struggle. His place in society has immersed him in a survival situation which is contradictory, at best, with human values. He has felt the ongoing whiplashes of racism at every turn and in every new

¹ From: *The Forces At Work* by Maria Marta Arís-Paúl (1933-2015),

experience. Prison (“The only thing I know.”) is a non-solution to the problem of crime in our society. Will William have a chance to prove his manhood and rearrange his life for a positive future? The effects of the prison experience are devastating, and following, I shall try to explain why.

In this society, the thirty-foot wall is designed as much to keep those people in who are to be confined, as it is to keep everyone else out! That wall is impressive and a powerful symbol of people’s inhumanity against their kind.

I believe that behind every criminal law, behind every arrest, and on every prison wall is the stark message, “your submission or your life.” Coercion is the underlying reality of prison life, and the evils which appear behind it are: the denial of autonomy, the degradation of dignity, the destruction of self-reliance, the inculcation of authoritarian/paternalistic values, the impairment of beneficial interaction among peers, the fractioning of family ties, the destruction of the family’s economic stability, and the negatives in the prisoner’s future prospects for improvement in economic and social status. These evils are present whether or not the prison buildings are clean or dirty, whether the aroma is that of fresh bakery products or stale urine, whether the cell is 5’x7’ or a larger “room” with a key for its occupant, whether prisoners interact in their cells or corridors (termed idleness) or in the structured setting of time and place (termed “group therapy”).

Those of us on the outside of the wall ponder the reasons behind the punishment of imprisonment. Three reasons come to mind from hearing bureaucrats speak about this: revenge or retribution, reform or rehabilitation, and deterrence.

Maria Marta Aris-Paul

October 5, 1933-October 7, 2015



Maria Marta Aris-Paul, wife of Rev. Edwin Muller, died October 7, 2015, after a long struggle with cancer. Born in Guatemala City, Guatemala, October 5, 1933, Maria Marta received a classical bilingual education, excelled both academically and athletically, holding several national swimming records. She is a graduate of Smith College, B.A. (cum laude), and Union Theological Seminary, M.Div. In 1983 Maria Marta was ordained a priest in the Episcopal Church, Diocese of New York. After completing Clinical Pastoral Education, she became Senior Chaplain at Wallkill Correctional Facility in upstate New York. She also served as Priest-in-Charge at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in New Paltz, N.Y. and later became Executive Director of Instituto Pastoral Hispano, located at General Theological Seminary in New York City.

It was through their common work in prisons that Maria Marta and Ed Muller met. They were married in 1980 at The Riverside Church in New York, by Rev. William Sloan Coffin Jr.

A Requiem Eucharist was celebrated by the Rt. Rev. Andrew M.L. Dietsche, Episcopal Bishop of New York, at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, New Paltz, N.Y., on November 7, 2015.

Maria Marta is survived by her husband Rev. Edwin Muller, and from a previous marriage, four sons and two daughters. Ed is the father of five daughters from a previous marriage.

Maria Marta wrote in a chapter she contributed to, *REVOLUTION OF SPIRIT: Ecumenical Theology in Global Context*: "I want to be a bridge between cultures and a healer where healing is needed." As a priest, pastor, teacher, and chaplain, Maria Marta was certainly known as a compassionate healer.

Submitted by: Rev. Edwin Muller

Interment: Rhinebeck Cemetery, NY and Lake Atitlan, Guatemala