



Walking with Jesus on the Way to Salvation

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Introduction

This Way of the Cross [1] was originally led by Pope Francis on Good Friday in 2020 with meditations prepared by the Chaplaincy of Padua Prison in Italy. We modified some meditations to include meditations on issues in the United States Justice System in this presentation. The meditations were written by: prisoners, victims, family members, and workers and ministers at prisons. Each shares his or her experience of the Cross.

The artwork [2] for each station used in “Walking with Jesus on the Way to Salvation” was painted on two scrolls as a collaborative effort of several artists, all of whom reside on Tennessee's death row. Not all are Christians, or even religious. The leader of the project, Derrick Quintero, asked his fellow community members to help create this art project to begin a conversation about what Justice looks like. Among the principal artists Derrick Quintero passed away in prison from cancer, Billy Irick was executed in August 2018, and Harold Nichols has an execution date set in June 2022, Donald Middlebrooks has an execution date set for December 2022 and Gary Sutton remains on death row. We thank Deacon W. James Booth, who continues to serve this community through the prison ministry program in the Diocese of Nashville, for permission to use their artwork.

I. *Jesus is Condemned to Death*

“... What evil has he done? I have found in him no crime deserving death; I will therefore chastise him and release him.” But they were urgent, demanding with loud cries that he should be crucified. And their voices prevailed (Lk 23:22-23).

Meditation by a prisoner serving a life sentence

Alone in my cell, when I re-read the pages of the Passion of Christ, I burst into tears: after 29 years in prison, I have not yet lost the capacity to cry, to feel ashamed of my past history and of the evil I did. I feel like Barabbas, Peter and Judas in one single person. I am repelled by my past, even though I know it is my story... I was always searching for something that would be life: strange to say, prison was my salvation. If, for some, I am still Barabbas, that does not make me angry: I know in my heart that the Innocent One, condemned like me, came to find me in prison to teach me about life.

Let us pray. By your cross you have redeemed the world.

All: Lord Jesus help us walk in your steps.



II. Jesus Takes Up His Cross

The soldiers... clothed him in a purple cloak, and plaiting a crown of thorns they put it on him. And they began to salute him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" And they struck his head with a reed, and spat upon him.... And they led him out to crucify him (Mk 15:16-18 and 20).

Meditation by two parents whose daughter was murdered

Our life as parents died together with that of our two daughters. One of them was murdered ... by the blind violence of a ruthless man; the other, who miraculously survived, was forever deprived of her smile. Time has not eased the weight of the cross placed upon our shoulders: we are unable to forget our daughter who is no longer with us.

This is difficult to say, but at the moment, in which despair seems to take over, the Lord in different ways comes to meet us, giving us the grace to love one another as spouses, and to support one another, hard as it is. He invites us to keep the door of our home open to the poor and the despairing, welcoming whoever knocks, even if only for a bowl of soup. The commandment to perform acts of charity is for us a kind of salvation.

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III. Jesus Falls for the First Time

He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all (Is 53:5-6).

Meditation by a prisoner

I hadn't realized that evil was slowly growing inside me. Until one evening, my own hour of darkness struck: in a second, like an avalanche, the memories of all the injustices I had suffered in life exploded...I committed an evil immensely greater than any of those that I had received. Then, in prison the ill-treatment by others led me to self-hatred: I was close to ending it all, I had reached the limit. ... I will serve my sentence to the end because in prison I have found people who have given me back the faith I had lost.

My first fall was failing to realize that goodness exists in this world.
My second, the murder for I was already dead inside.

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IV. *Jesus Meets His Mother*

When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home (Jn 19:26-27).

Meditation by the mother of a prisoner

Not for a moment was I tempted to abandon my son in the face of his sentence. The day he was arrested changed our entire life.

I feel Mother Mary close to me: she helps me not to give into despair and to cope with the pain. I've entrusted my son to her: only to Mary can I confide my fears, since she herself experienced them on the way to Calvary. In her heart she knew that her Son would not escape human evil, yet she did not abandon him. She stood there sharing in his suffering, keeping him company by her presence. I think of Jesus looking up, seeing those eyes so full of love, and not feeling alone.

I pray constantly for my son, so that day by day he can grow into a different man, capable once more of loving himself and others.

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V. *Simon of Cyrene Helps Jesus*

As they led him away, they seized one Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, and laid on him the cross, to carry it behind Jesus (Lk 23:26).

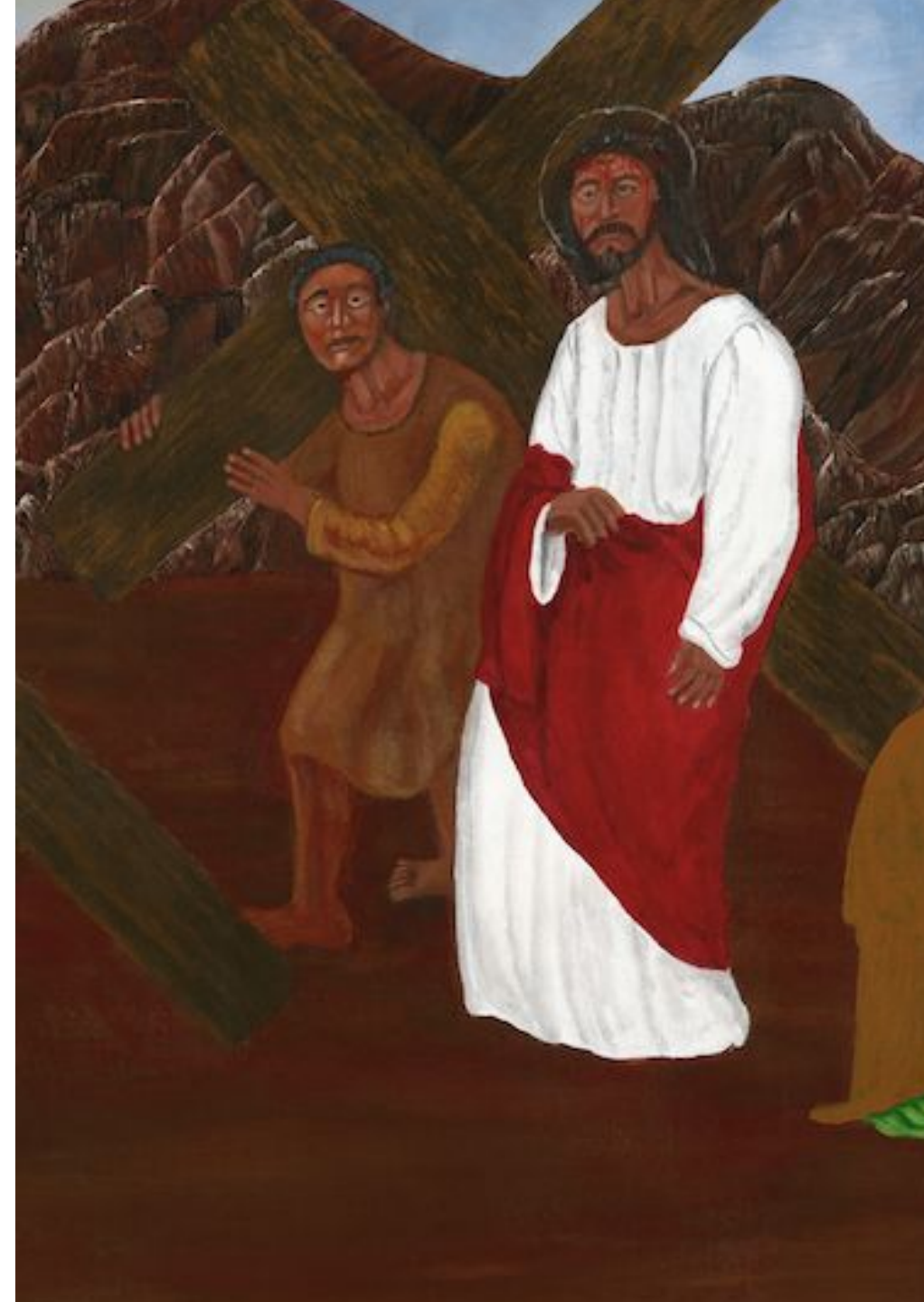
Meditation by a prisoner

The cross they placed on my shoulders is a heavy one. Over time I have learned to live with it, to look it in the face, to call it by name: we spend many nights keeping each other company. Inside prisons, Simon of Cyrene is known by everyone: it is the second name of volunteers, of those who mount this Calvary to help carry a cross; they are people who reject the law of the pack and listen to their conscience.

I'm growing old in prison: I dream that one day, I will be able to trust others. To become a Cyrenean, bringing joy to someone.

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All: Lord Jesus help us walk in your steps



VI. *Veronica Wipes the Face of Jesus*

My heart says to you, "Your face, Lord, do I seek." Hide not your face from me. Turn not your servant away in anger, you who have been my help. Cast me not off, forsake me not, O God of my salvation! (Ps 27:8-9).

Meditation by a nun

Many times, I meet despairing souls who, in the darkness of prison, try to find a reason for the evil that to them seems infinite. Their tears are those of defeat and loneliness, of remorse and lack of understanding. I often imagine Jesus here in prison in my stead: how would he wipe away the tears?

The way pointed out to me by Christ is to contemplate, without fear, those faces marred by suffering. I am asked to remain there with them, respecting their silence, listening to their pain, and seeking to look beyond prejudice. Everyone, including those in prison, has an opportunity each day to become a new person, thanks to Christ's look which does not judge, but gives life and hope.

Let us pray. By your cross you have redeemed the world.

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VII. *Jesus Falls for the Second Time*

Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” And they cast lots to divide his garments (Lk 23:34).

Meditation by a former woman prisoner

Half-way through my sentence I’m settling into my routine. The food is what it is, and I need to eat to survive.

My son’s father wants to take my boy away from me, but I need to do everything I can to be a good mom when I get out. I wanted to work but couldn’t – the wait list was kind of long. But I still have faith. I still have hope.

Jesus fell under the weight of his cross, but he got back up.

So did I, and now that I am out, I have custody of my son.

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All: Lord Jesus help us walk in your steps.



VIII. *Jesus Meets the Women of Jerusalem*

There followed him a great multitude of the people, and of women who bewailed and lamented him. But Jesus turning to them said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed!’ (Lk 23:27-29)

Meditation by the daughter of a man sentenced to life imprisonment

For twenty-eight years I have been serving the sentence of growing up without a father.” For all these years I have lived with anger, restlessness, sadness: his absence is a heavy burden to bear...Life forced me to become an adult without ever being a child...Dad is one of those sentenced to life imprisonment. The day I got married, I dreamed of having him beside me: even then he was thinking of me, though hundreds of kilometers away. “Such is life!” I say, to encourage myself. For people like us, hope is a duty.

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All: Lord Jesus help us walk in your steps.



IX. Jesus Falls for the Third Time

Let him sit alone in silence when he has laid it on him; let him put his mouth in the dust – there may yet be hope; let him give his cheek to the one who strikes him, and be filled with insults. For the Lord will not cast off forever; but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love (Lam 3:28-32).

Meditation by a prisoner

Falling down is never pleasant; but beyond the fact that it is unpleasant, falling over and over again becomes itself a kind of condemnation, as if one is no longer capable of remaining standing. As a man, I have fallen all too many times: I have also gotten up many times. In prison I often think about how many times a child falls to the ground before learning to walk: I am coming to think that these are preparations for all the times when we will fall as adults.

I will tell my granddaughter about the one who, when I lay fallen on the ground, brought me the mercy of God. In prison, the worst form of despair is to think that life no longer has meaning. My life was shattered into a thousand pieces, but the wonderful thing is that those pieces can still be put together.

Let us pray. By your cross you have redeemed the world.

All: Lord Jesus help us walk in your steps.



X. Jesus Is Stripped of His Garments

“Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it shall be.” This was to fulfill the Scripture, “They parted my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots” (Jn 19:24).

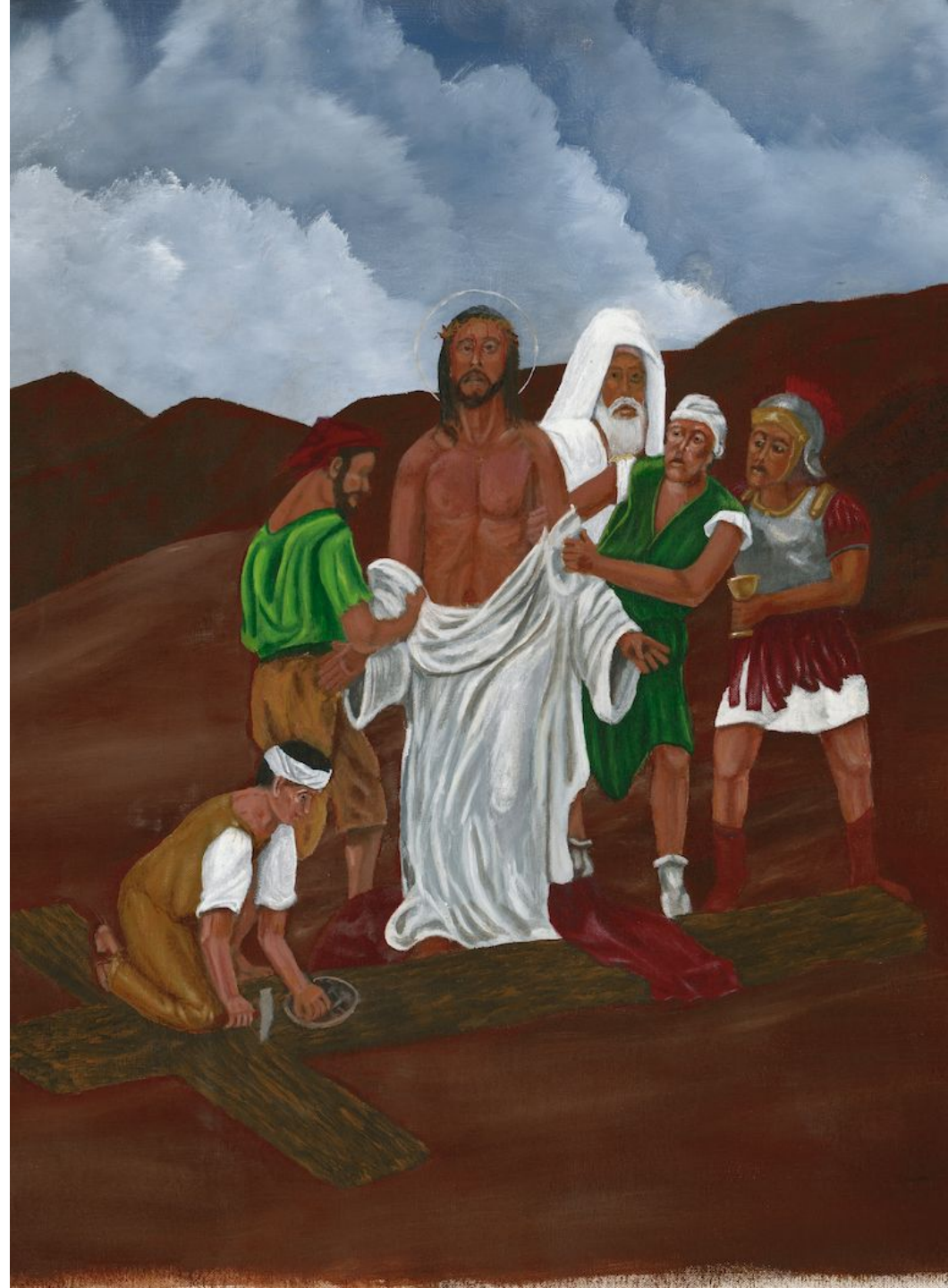
Meditation by a prison teacher

As a teacher, I see people entering jail deprived of everything: stripped of all dignity because of the crimes they have committed, stripped of all respect for themselves and for others. Every day I see how they become more and more dependent behind bars: they need me even to help write a letter. These are the unsettled lives entrusted to my care: helpless, frustrated by their weakness, frequently deprived of even the ability to understand the wrong they have done.

Encountering daily all this anger, pain and hidden malice ends up wearing down even the most experienced of us. We need to feel that we are not abandoned, in order to be able to support the many lives entrusted to us, lives that each day run the risk of ruin.

Let us pray. By your cross you have redeemed the world.

All: Lord Jesus help us walk in your steps.



XI. Jesus Is Nailed to the Cross

When they came to the place which is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on the right and one on the left. And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" ... One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong" (Lk 23:33-34 and 39-43).

Meditation by a priest leading a ministry of reconciliation [3]

I was working with a group of Spanish speaking mothers who lost children to homicide, so you can imagine that kind of trauma. The mothers attended a mass at a juvenile detention center where I work and we created a space where the mothers and young people could sit together.

When it came to introductions, many mothers just wept -- losing a child was their identity. One young man spoke of not knowing his mother, another of a mother in jail, another of a mother on drugs. Through the space and conversation, the mothers saw these young people differently — they were not just delinquents, but rather individuals who carried their own traumas. So, there was a bond that formed in this unlikely group of folks who all experience trauma, different kinds of trauma.

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All: Lord Jesus help us walk in your steps.



XII. *Jesus Dies on the Cross*

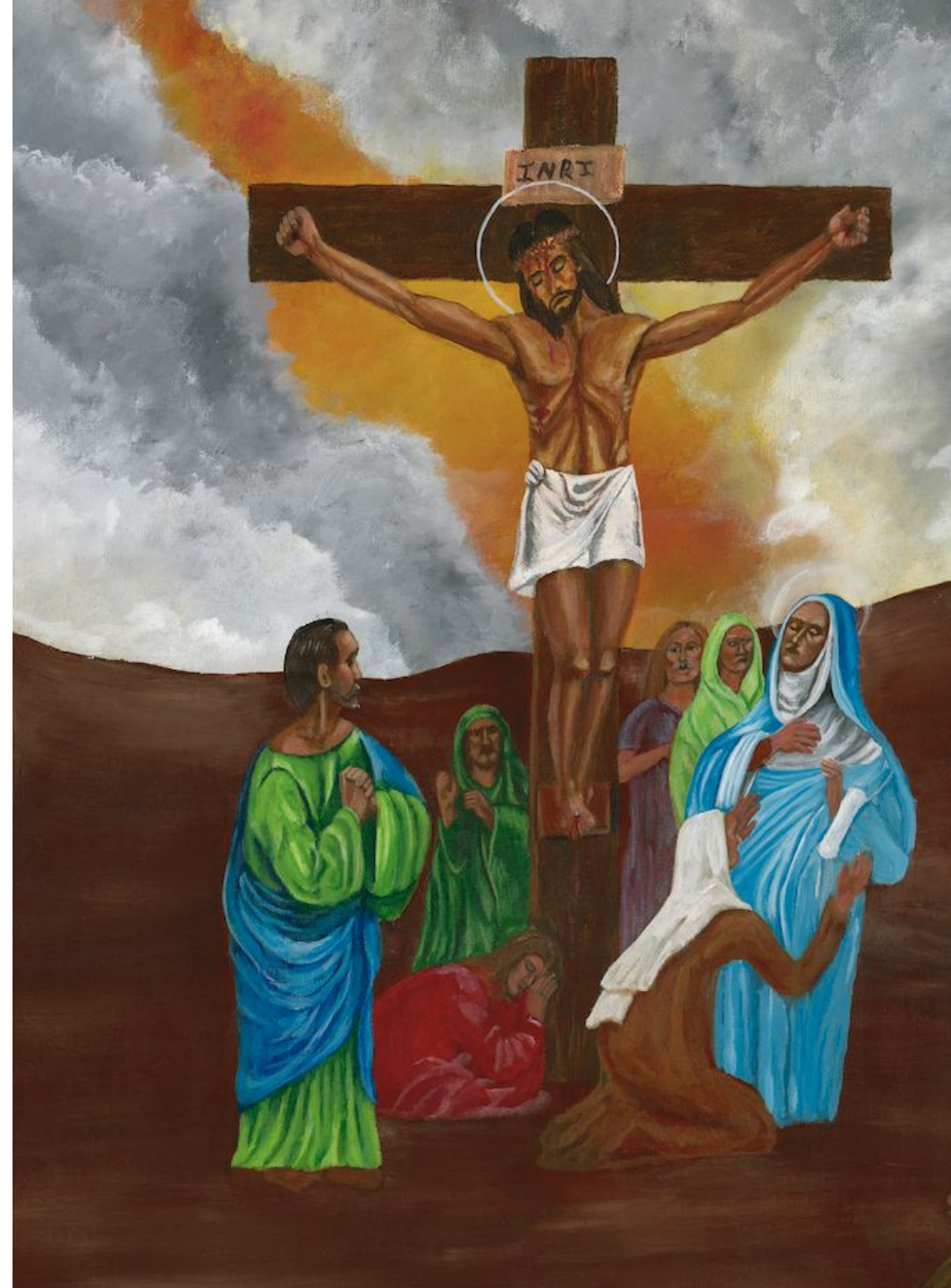
It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." And having said this he breathed his last (Lk 23:44-46).

Meditation by a civil magistrate

True justice, however, is possible only through a mercy that does not crucify an individual forever, but becomes a guide in helping him to get up and to realize the goodness that, for all the wrong he has done, is never completely extinguished in his heart. Only by finding his own humanity again will the convicted person be able to see himself in others, in the victim to whom he caused such pain. As much as his path of rebirth can be tortuous and the risk of falling back into evil remains always present, there is no other way to try to rebuild his own personal and communal history.

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All: Lord Jesus help us walk in your steps.



XIII. *Jesus Taken Down from the Cross*

Now there was a man named Joseph,...and he was looking for the kingdom of God. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down and wrapped it in a linen shroud, and laid him in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever yet been laid (Lk 23:50-53).

A Prayer for the End of the Death Penalty [4]

God who is love,

In his last statement in this life, [your beloved child, Ernest Johnson](#), wrote about love.

“I want to say that I love my family and friends.”

Of those who stepped up to defend him, he said, “they made me feel love as if I was family to them.”

“I love the Lord with all my heart and soul.”

God who forgives,

Ernest Johnson wrote that he believed he would be with you in heaven because, though he committed a terrible crime, he sought your forgiveness.

We will never comprehend the depth of your mercy, which brings saints and sinners alike into your embrace.

May we still trust in your ways.

God who became human,

You, too, died at the hands of the state.

As you suffered on the Cross, many taunted and jeered, believing justice was being done.

Let us pray. By your cross you have redeemed the world.

All: Lord Jesus help us walk in your steps.



XIV. *Jesus Is Laid in the Tomb*

It was the day of Preparation, and the sabbath was beginning. The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and saw the tomb, and how his body was laid; then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments. On the sabbath they rested according to the commandment (Lk 23:54-56).

Meditation by a founder of a reentry program

“It is in dying that we are born to eternal life.”

Here in my cell, I am surrounded in darkness, lying in the tomb. I have died to myself by coming to terms with what brought me to this place. The choices I made are now dead to me, because I am no longer the man that I was.

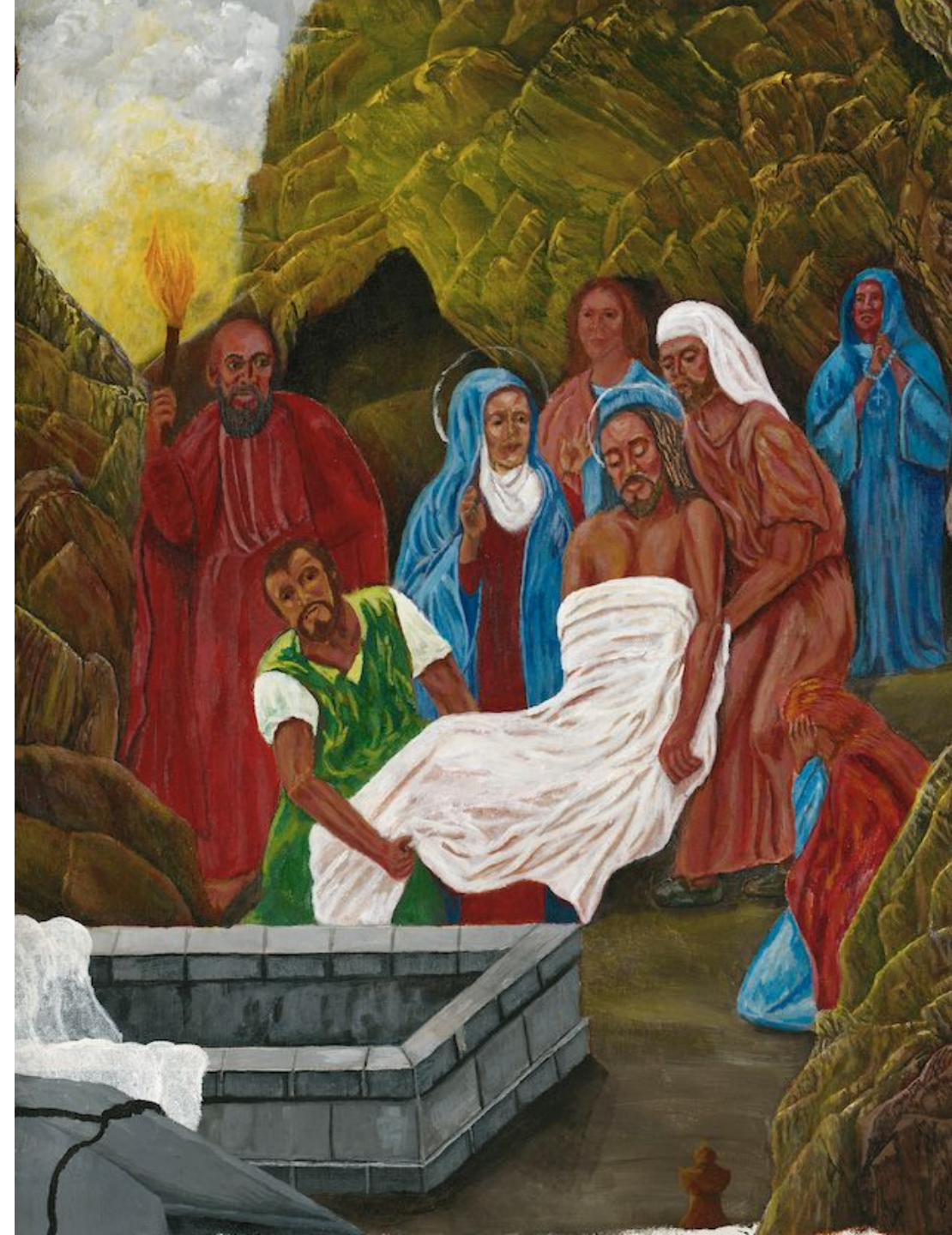
God awaits my own resurrection with an intense desire to share this with others returning from prison – because, like the tomb, my prison cell is now empty!

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All: Lord Jesus help us walk in your steps.

Concluding Prayer:

O God, fill with your blessings those who devote themselves to your praise and to the service of those who suffer in the countless places of human pain and sorrow. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.





Acknowledgements

[1] "The Way of the Cross Led by His Holiness Pope Francis," The Vatican, April 10, 2020, Vatican City.

https://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/2020/documents/ns_lit_d oc_20200410_via-crucis-meditazioni_en.html, (We modified meditations for several stations to address issues that arise in the corrections systems in the United States.)

[2] Derrick Quintero and other artist from the Tennessee Riverbend Maximum Security Prison, "Men of Hope Stations of the Cross Project," 2019, Nashville, TN. Derrick Quintero passed away in prison from cancer. Of other principal artists who worked on the artwork: Billy Irick was executed in August 2018, Harold Nichols has an execution date set for June 2022, Donald Middlebrooks has a date set for December 2022 and Gray Sutton remains on Death Row. Learn more here:

<https://catholicismobilizing.org/blog/stations-cross-art-project>.

[3] Molly Cahill, A Prayer for the End of the Death Penalty, *America*, October 6, 2021, New York, NY.

<https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2021/10/06/death-penalty-prayer-241580>.

[4] Fr. David Kelly and Caitlin Moureau, "Encounters with Dignity: Asking Different Questions," January 30, 2022, Catholic Mobilizing Network, Washington, DC. Listen to the Podcast:

<https://encounters-with-dignity.captivate.fm/episode/fr-david-kelly-cpps-asking-the-right-questions>,