

When Is It Time to Let Go?

by Rev. Thomas McNally, C.S.C.



two beautiful lakes. I've gone back to the prison for short visits and almost broke into tears the first time, when the guys gave me a standing ovation. Last Sunday, I celebrated Mass there for the first time in months and gave Communion to my friends.

But somehow it's not the same. I haven't summoned up the nerve to return to the segregation unit where the accident happened. I dread those stairs! I guess I'll just have to pray about the situation and ask the Lord what he wants me to do. It's all in his hands and I'll try to do his will no matter what that is.

Meanwhile I have many memories. When I celebrated Mass last Sunday I once again looked at the large sign on the back of the wall. It faces the priest who is celebrating Mass and reads, "But for the Grace of God," as a stark reminder that I might have ended up in one of those cells in segregation if my background and family situation resembled that of most of the prisoners in front of me.

Of course, no matter how difficult their background, the men must bear responsibility for the terrible things they have done. Only a few claim they are innocent for the crimes for which they

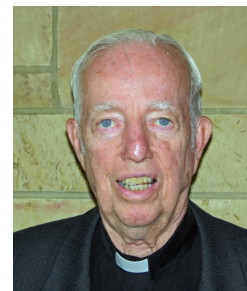
were committed. Many are remorseful for what they have done - but not all. I think of one of my friends whose name is Harry. Harry, who murdered a young girl when he was 17, perhaps will die in prison. He is a realist. "Most of the men who are here are right where they belong," he says.

But I love them anyway.

I remember the men on death row whom I have not seen in months. When they learned about my injury, they sent me a get well card and most scribbled a short note and signed it. A get well card from men who have far greater problems than me! Three times I have accompanied one of their companions to his place of execution.

Tomorrow I will return to death row for the first time since my accident. It will be a happy occasion and I look forward to the visit. But I'm not sure if I will tell the men that I may never see them again. It's never easy to give up something you love. But we all have to face the possibility sooner or later in our lives. And the question is always the same: "When is it Time to Let Go?"

Fr. Thomas McNally, C.S.C., a native of Winnetka, IL, was ordained in 1961. He was editor and publisher of two youth magazines formerly published by the Congregation of Holy Cross, and served as an associate director of Campus Ministry at the University of Notre Dame under the late Fr. William Toohey, C.S.C. He lived in campus dorms for many years and for a time was rector at Grace Hall. Later he was pastor of parishes in California and South Bend and also ministered for a time in Chile. He is the co-editor of two popular prayer books, "Day by Day" and "Lord, Hear Our Prayer," both published by Ave Maria Press, a ministry of the Congregation of Holy Cross, United States Province.



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I was visiting prisoners last October - something I love to do. I had seen the men on the fifth range of the segregation unit at the Indiana State Prison and decided to walk down a flight and visit the men on the fourth range. I wanted to give a book to Eric, who had expressed an interest in it after I recommended it on a previous visit. The book was "Jesus, a Pilgrimage," by James Martin, S.J., the account of his travels to the Holy Land.

The book, a big one, was in my shoulder bag, nestled among greeting cards and rosaries I always carry on my visits. As I moved onto the first step, the bag shifted a bit on my shoulder. Distracted, I forgot what I was doing and missed the next step. Suddenly, I was airborne and headed for a rocky landing on the hard platform eight steps down. I arrived with a clatter that was heard by everyone, including a couple of men I had just prayed with.

Some guards found me sprawled on the platform, conscious but bleeding from a head injury, among other assorted problems. The worst was my right wrist, which I had obviously broken as I tried to protect my head from the

onrushing platform. They loaded me onto a stretcher and carried me down the remaining four flights and into the courtyard. Eventually, I was transferred to another stretcher and loaded into an ambulance.



At St. Anthony Hospital, the emergency room crew put me back together again, made sure the head injury was not serious, and eventually put me in a

private room. It was then that I began to think about what just happened. I had been a volunteer chaplain at the prison for 12 years, ever since I "retired" from a parish in California and returned to Notre Dame. I loved the work and I think I was good at it. I liked the men and they liked me. I got along well with the superintendent and his staff and with most of the prison guards. Now what? Was this the beginning of the end of my prison ministry?

Of course, some would say it's about time to quit! I'm 88 years old, for heaven's sake! But I don't feel that way. I'm no hero and not trying to impress anyone - I simply enjoy the ministry and hate the thought of giving it up. I suspect that many of you reading these lines feel the same way about your work and don't look forward to your approaching retirement.

On the other hand, God seems to have sent me a very clear sign that I better start thinking of other things. I could start, for example, by reflecting on the possibility that he could be giving me a clear and dramatic hint that I should pack my bags and await his call to the next life.

The prison and St. Anthony Hospital are in Michigan City, Indiana. After a couple of days at that hospital, I was well enough to return to South Bend and Holy Cross House on the campus. This is where priests and brothers of the Congregation of Holy Cross retire or are treated for various ills. It is a beautiful facility with an excellent health care staff. And the residents include men like Fr. Hesburgh and renowned former professors and other Holy Cross legends. It is a great group of men who live, eat and pray together under the watchful eyes of dedicated nurses and other caregivers whose loving concern for each man is obvious. The nurses are too busy to do everything, so the men help each other at every turn, pushing the wheelchairs of non-walkers, for example. It's the last stop for many men before the Lord comes to take them home. Occasional "visitors" like me get the treatment they need and then return to where they came from.

My accident happened three months ago. Since that time, the cast has come off the wrist and I am no longer at Holy Cross House, but back in my private room on campus, overlooking one of the