



# The Book Reviewer

ST. MARY'S PARISH LIBRARY

MAY 2013

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### **The Prison Angel—Mother Antonia's Life of Service in a Mexican Jail**

by Mary Jordan and Kevin Sullivan (Social Justice)

This 2005 book tells the amazing story of Mary Brennan, a divorced mother of seven from Beverly Hills, who answers God's call to minister to prisoners in one of Mexico's worst prisons. While reading her story you may often find your mouth agape, so astounding is her faith, determination, and boundless love for even those who have committed heinous crimes.

As a housewife in the 1950s, Brennan was drawn to charitable works and labored tirelessly to support various organizations, using her home to store collected goods, and involving her children in outreach projects. When her second marriage came to an end, supporting her family never diminished her determination to help people in need. She learned of the enormous needs at La Mesa Prison in Tijuana when she agreed to

help a Pasadena priest deliver goods to the prisoners there. You will have to read the book to fully comprehend the squalid conditions at La Mesa, but Mary felt only deep compassion for the incarcerated. She was so affected by her experience that she determined to return frequently to deliver goods and words of comfort to the prisoners and their families.

By this point in the book, the reader understands that Mary Brennan eats up challenges that would be completely daunting to most of us. She was so moved by the plight of the people in La Mesa, and is such a vessel of God's non-judgmental love and compassion, that she chose to move into the prison and live like the inmates: in a cell with "rats, nasty smells, and even nastier graffiti." She learned the slangy Spanish of

the prison, and through her compassionate assistance and the nun-like habit she had adopted, those around her came to trust and love her deeply. She soon became known as Mother Antonia (named after a dear mentor) calling prisoners, guards, and their families "mis hijos" and they came to regard her as a true "Mamá."

Mother Antonia's encounters with petty thieves, drug kingpins, and murderers, and the ways in which she shows loving compassion to the worst criminals will astonish readers. Without denying their crimes, she focuses on their human faces, behind which Christ can be found. She never doubts the goodness and humanity in every person she meets, and she strives to help them recognize those qualities in themselves.

*Reviewed by Susan Triplett*

### **La Mamá A Film by Jody Hammond (DVD)**

This 28-minute documentary about Mother Antonia Brennan is a fine companion piece to *The Prison Angel*, especially for those who have a hard time believing that a real person could be capable of living so selflessly and loving so completely.

Narrated by Susan Sarandon, the film takes us to La Mesa Prison, where Mother Antonia in the flesh can be seen among the prisoners, their families, and the guards, whom she greets and blesses

with equal joy and tenderness. We hear testimonials from priests, politicians, and prisoners who express admiration and gratitude to this extraordinary woman who is God's servant and substitute mother to so many.

We get a chance to hear from Mother Antonia's birth sons who reflect with awe and pleasure on their mother's life-giving vocation to her imprisoned "hijos."

Finally, there is a segment about the order that Mother

Antonia was given permission to found—The Servants of the Eleventh Hour—made up of women, many of whom, like Mother Antonia, have raised families and are now too old to be accepted into other religious orders. They and associates of the order who have worked alongside "La Mamá" for decades describe how their prison work has given holy significance to their lives, and changed those they serve forever.

*Reviewed by Susan Triplett*



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*The Greatest Story  
Every Told*

### Becoming Who You Are by James Martin, S.J. (Spirituality)

Jesuit priest James Martin has an easy-to-read writing style that is friendly and frank. That may be why so many of his books have been reviewed in this parish library newsletter. Fr. Martin's honesty and self-deprecating humor are once again operating in this short collection of "Insights on the True Self from Thomas Merton and Other Saints," as the subtitle explains.

It is clear that Thomas Merton is the person who had the greatest impact on Fr. Martin's journey to find his authentic self. Most of the book is a loving tribute to Merton which explores his struggle to integrate all of his parts into one holy and honest life of faith. Merton's declaration that, "to be a saint is to be myself," resonated deeply with

the searching James Martin, and is the underlying theme of the book.

The life and example of Fr. Henri Nouwen also had a considerable impact on the author. This gifted and very human priest was another who needed to labor, and wrestle with his demons to find his truest self, along with a place where he could serve God most completely.

In reflecting on the way his own true identity was gradually revealed to him, Martin shares with the reader his childhood understanding of his Catholic faith, his college years and subsequent work as an accountant, and the ever-present nagging sense that he was meant for another life.

Among shorter reflec-

tions on other faithful Catholics who have had an impact on him, such as Dorothy Day, Flannery O'Connor, Mother Teresa, and various saints and popes, Martin spends a longer time exploring the journey to self-awareness of the man who most influenced his own: Jesus Christ. This is, perhaps, the most engaging section of the book, as Martin imaginatively ponders Jesus' growing awareness of, over the course of his entire short life, the fullness of his identity, first as a man of faith, and ever so gradually as God.

At the end of the book, Fr. Martin recommends books for further reading, many of which you will find in our parish library.

Reviewed by Susan Triplett

### Inner Compass by Margaret Silf (Spirituality)

Margaret Silf writes as one who is not promoting a 30-day retreat, but a *life-long* retreat, based on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola. Writing from her own deeply felt experience of God in nature and in the workplace, she beautifully illuminates the Ignatian spirituality.

Not only from her own life stories, but with stories of many friends and of people met along the way, she manages to bring to life Ignatian concepts of choice and "discernment of spirits", and of remaining true

to our own inner compass, which is God in us. If we remain true to that voice we become witnesses to the Good News of the grace we have received.

The end of the retreat also brings a greater understanding of the problem of pain and suffering, our own and of that of others; and of our own meaning and purpose in life; and of the meaning of the Mass and Eucharist. "When our suffering is connected in prayer to God's, it becomes like His, redemptive."

*"Like the Eucharistic bread, we are consecrated in order to be broken and given to others. Like the Eucharistic wine, we are consecrated to be poured out for others. Consecration is always a community matter. It is an act of inclusiveness, expressing the all-inclusive love of God."*

Reviewed by Clare Dinno

