

Be the light against all odds

By Father Joseph Breighner

In the May 18 issue of the Baltimore Sun, there was this short paragraph tucked in among many other news stories under the title World Briefing: “WHITE HOUSE: Prisons must curb sex abuse. “Prisons and other facilities where residents are forcibly confined must put in place standards to prevent thousands of sexual abuse every year, the White House and Department of Justice said Thursday.

Advocates of a 2003 law to eliminate prison rape see sexual assault in U.S. Prisons as rampant and grossly overlooked. More than 209,400 people were victims of sexual abuse in prisons, jails and juvenile detention facilities in 2008 the Justice Department said.”

Stop for a moment and think: 210, 400 cases of sexual abuse in one year! And it gets two small paragraphs tucked in among other news items. Contrast that to the space given to stories of clergy sexual abuse. Don't get me wrong. In no way am I defending what any priest did. A single case is one too many, and, yes, these were children. And, no, I'm not in any way defending church authorities who may have covered up cases, or knowingly reassigned priests, putting more children at risk. But I am pointing out how selective the media is in what news it chooses to headline.

While many people may not care about people in prison (“If you do the crime you do the time”), never have I once heard a judge sentence anyone to: “— years in prison and repeated sexual abuse.” I've never heard that sentence. No one is sentenced to being sodomized, raped or abused. And yet it happens in numbers that stagger the imagination. And, if we're honest, the number reported is far below the actual

number abused. And each person abused is someone's son or daughter, someone's father or mother, someone's brother or sister. Each person being abused is "Christ in his most distressing disguise."

If I'm a prisoner, who do I tell? Does my cellmate care? He might be the perpetrator! Do the guards care? Does the administration care? And if he or she does report sexual abuse, their lives might be at risk. Fear of reprisal keeps many a mouth shut.

No, I'm not using this article to bash the media. I see more "good" stories than ever in the media. I'm simply asking them to follow this story, and bring light to those imprisoned in darkness.

And, no, I'm not bashing prison authorities. Most really are doing the best they can. Hats off to the guards who do protect the vulnerable from the predators. There's a place in the kingdom of God for such courage. Hats off to prison authorities who do run the safest prisons possible. Hats off to prison chaplains and all those involved in prison ministry. You bring the presence of Christ to forgotten people.

And hats off to those people in prison who are strong, and do not prey on the weak. And, even better, hats off to those who are strong who protect the weak from other prisoners. If those who give a cup of water in the name of Christ are remembered, you surely will be remembered by Christ.

Perhaps the ultimate point I'm making in this article is that in every second, in every minute of life, you and I are making choices. I can choose to focus on what's wrong, and see that expand, or I can choose to focus on what's right, and see that expand. I can choose to hurt, or I can choose to heal. I can choose to be a predator, or I can choose to be a protector. I can choose to do the right thing, or I can choose to do the wrong thing. I can choose to focus on what's wrong with others and see more of that, or I can choose to focus on improving myself, and make myself and the world a

better place. I can choose to curse the darkness, and add to the negativity of life, or I can choose to love, and add to the joy and peace of life. Remember darkness doesn't go away because we curse it, blame it, or point it out to others. Darkness is scattered by light. A single candle lights a whole room. One person who dares to love against all the odds carries a light that no amount of darkness can extinguish.

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