

The Book I Read in Prison

"I was 29 and had been in prison for two years. One day a Sister of Charity gave me a book called 'Friends of God'... ".

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I was 29 and had been in prison in Spain for two years after committing a crime. At that time I saw God as being very far from my life. I thought he was in heaven and I was on earth. The only thing I was clear about was that he did exist.

I had never heard of Saint Josemaria Escriva, until a nun, one of the Sisters of Charity, brought me a book called ***Friends of God*** . After reading it I can say that I was quite sure that God was not only in heaven but also on earth and within me.

As a child I received a good Catholic education, but when I was a teenager my friends would say, “God doesn’t exist, don’t be stupid, go for progress, get up to date...” And I let myself be led. Sometimes you need someone to come and speak plainly, and that’s what Saint Josemaria did for me through that book.

I realized how far I had cut God out of my life and how I had cheated on him. I began to understand that God is not a just a number to call in emergencies, I discovered that I need to love him in good times and in bad, and keep him always by my side,

because I can't do anything without him.

Thanks to that book, I set out along a path that I have never regretted. I began reading all Saint Josemaria's books and lent them to other people in prison – and they didn't give them back!

The World Youth Day Cross was carried through the prison. My heart was shaken to its depths, and there and then a dream was born, a fantastic plan to bring my sister, who was still living back in my country, to the World Youth Day in Madrid so we could both take part in it together. I was working in the prison laundry and earning very little money, but I saved it all up and began to plan seriously.

At that point my sister was 20 and at university. She wouldn't be able to afford to come. My family broke up six years ago: my father deserted my

mother and left her and my sister practically destitute. It is true that he paid for my sister's studies, but only after a lot of pressure.

With that goal, I put all my hope in the Lord, and after going without absolutely anything for a year, I managed to get the money together and sent it to her. She booked a place to come to the WYD in Madrid with the official delegation of the Bishops' Conference of our country.

When my dream seemed about to come true, I was refused permission to attend the WYD. I had done 4 years of my 6-year sentence, and had 3 months left before I was eligible for parole, when inexplicably the prison authorities, knowing that my sister was coming and that I'd saved up the money at the cost of great sacrifice, refused permission for no reason.

Two months before the WYD I was tearing my hair out. I'd written

letters to the prison governor, the judge, the probation service... I explained my situation and how much I wanted to experience the WYD with my sister, after 4 years without seeing her or any of my family, since none of them are in Spain. I got no reply and was losing hope. The WYD was just around the corner and I was in despair. At that point my sister began a novena to Saint Josemaria: 9 days of mortification, prayer and recollection, praying that I would get the permission I so desperately needed.

I was getting used to the idea that only my sister would be in Madrid in August; for me that was what mattered. But I couldn't help feeling frustrated inside that after so much effort and self-denial I wouldn't be able to be there with her and would have to content myself with seeing

her for two hours through a window. Such a long journey just for that.

Then the miracle happened. The day after my sister finished the novena, the tenth day, I was told that the probation service had decided to authorize me to go out on parole for the six days of the WYD so that I could go to Madrid and meet my sister there.

I just couldn't believe it, but at last the date of the WYD arrived and I saw my sister again. The high point of that week was the youth encounter with the Pope at Cuatro Vientos. That night, I decided not to keep God waiting any longer; I decided to give my life to him, to live for him alone. To live in holiness, to sanctify my work, and my studies, which I took up again; and to sanctify my life and other people's.

Saint Josemaria has taught me how to live: that man made me react and I

owe him much of what I am. He formed me spiritually and taught me to cleanse myself interiorly, to forgive, to say sorry, to forgive myself, and he taught me that Jesus Christ is really our friend, our Father, and that he loves us more than anyone. Before I met Jesus I had nothing and was nothing. Now I am happy, and thanks to him my life at last makes sense.

Now I have finished my sentence and come back to my country, a different person from what I was when I first went to prison. All of it is thanks to God, who took my life to rebuild it again. Now that I have given my life to him I am preparing to enter the seminary if that is God's Will.

J. A.

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