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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY NEW ORLEANS

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Celebrating Advent in Prison

By Annie Phoenix, Ph.D.

During this Advent season students at Rayburn Correctional Center are preparing for their final exams and waiting for a final grade to culminate their first semester as Loyola students. Recently their professor, Dr. Marcus Kondkar, asked his students on Loyola's main campus to send some words of encouragement to his students in the prison and vice versa. I'd like to share a few notes from the students in prison with you, which I think resonate with the hope, peace, joy, and love of the Advent season.

HOPE:

Thank you for your kind words and encouragement. It really means a lot. I don't get much correspondence from the outside world, so just hearing from you all, even though it wasn't to me directly, gives me motivation to continue. I really appreciate the notes and truly thank you again.

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PEACE:

We are excited to be connected with you thru Loyola. For some, this connection may be the closest they'll get to freedom. So, do well for US!!
Happy Holidays!

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JOY:

I hear y'all's campus is much nicer than ours.

"I hear y'all's campus is much nicer than ours"

LOVE:

Happy Holidays
Cherish the moments
with your family!!

"Happy Holidays. Cherish the moments with your family!!"

Our student's notes to the outside world also remind me of the Advent reflections in *Prison Writings*, by Alfred Delp, S.J., a Jesuit in Nazi Germany who actively resisted fascism by planning for a world led by the Christian values of love and community. When Fr. Delp was arrested by the Nazis, he was told that he would be released if he renounced the Jesuits. He chose instead to die for his faith. In the months leading to his execution he wrote a series of reflections on Advent as he sat in his prison cell. Primarily Fr. Delp wrote of happiness and freedom. I wish I could share the whole book with you, but instead I'll offer this quote that I think is particularly relevant to our students at Rayburn:

"During these long weeks of confinement I have learned by personal experience that a person is truly lost, is the victim of circumstances and oppression, only when he is incapable of a great inner sense of depth and freedom. Anyone whose natural element is not an atmosphere of freedom, unassailable and unshakeable whatever force may be put on it, is already lost; but such a person is not really a human being anymore; he is merely an object, a number, a voting paper. And the **inner freedom can only be attained if we have discovered the means of widening our own horizons**. We must progress and grow, we must mount above our own limitations...Human freedom is born in the moment of our contact with God. It is really unimportant whether God forces us out of our limits by the sheer distress of much suffering, coaxes us with visions of beauty and truth, or pricks us into action by endless hunger and thirst for righteousness that possess our soul. What really matters is the fact that we are called and we must be sufficiently awake to hear the call."

Our students have answered the call and joined our Loyola community. They are widening their horizons and seeking inner freedom from physical confinement. Education is first and foremost a pursuit of knowledge and truth about ourselves and the world. As Fr. Delp reminds us, "The Truth shall set you free—and freedom, in every part of life is all that matters."

As you prepare to celebrate with your families this holiday season, please remember in your thoughts and prayers those who are not able to be with their loved ones, like our Loyola students at Rayburn.

Finally, during this season of giving, I would like to thank the generous donors who have answered the call to sponsor a student at Rayburn by donating \$2,857 to cover the full cost of a student for one year in the program. We are particularly grateful to Marcela Villareal de Panetta and Bernard Panetta for matching donations for five students. If you are interested in sponsoring a student, please reach out!

Wishing you a blessed Advent and Merry Christmas!

Annie Phoenix

Monthly articles reflect the opinions of the authors and not necessarily those of Loyola University New Orleans.
Please send feedback to jsri@loyno.edu

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As our prison education program continues to grow, we need to make sure that each and every one has access to an exceptional educational experience. We can't do it without your help. [Give today!](#)

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