

Inmates share stories of faith and redemption during Dubuque retreat

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Deacon Bill Hickson speaks Saturday, Dec. 10, 2016, during Where Justice and Mercy Meet at St. Anthony Church in Dubuque.



For a long time, hate and anger drove Richard Mockmore.

Faced with a 35-year prison sentence for a violent crime, he fantasized about taking out his fury on his accuser, police officers and anyone else he could blame for his incarceration.

But a few fellow inmates saw potential in Mockmore, something beneath his raging, bitter veneer. They persuaded him to participate in Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults, a path to salvation for wayward souls.

“They saw something in me that I didn’t know in myself,” Mockmore said Saturday at St. Anthony Church in Dubuque. “That anger and bitterness started going away, and I became a new man through Christ.”

High walls and iron bars are no match for the redeeming power of Christ, according to a group of tri-state religious leaders.

Nearly 100 people heard testimonials to that point during the inaugural Where Justice and Mercy Meet retreat. The event featured a panel discussion and readings of essays from prisoners at Anamosa State Penitentiary.

Bill Hickson, a deacon with the Archdiocese of Dubuque and coordinator of the jail and prison ministry at Catholic Charities, helped organize the event. All eight

first-person accounts of spiritual salvation come from prisoners with whom he and other outreach volunteers have worked.

The stories are ecumenical, penned by men of varying faiths, according to Hickson. But all share a common theme, he said.

“I think it’s a very inspiring day,” Hickson said. “There’s a lot of evidence of acceptance of God’s forgiveness and mercy.”

Essays were written by a man serving a life sentence for murder and a man who, as a hospice volunteer, oversaw a fellow inmate’s spiritual awakening.

“They talk about their early life before they really knew Jesus or had any strength of faith and how at some point, usually after committing an offense, they had time to get in touch with their spiritual side,” Hickson said.

Deacon Bill Mauss has been working with prisoners for more than 20 years. Through programs like RCIA, he’s seen more than 30 men convert to the Catholic faith.

The readings show the value of spirituality in inmates’ lives, Mauss said.

“Most of them speak to forgiveness and recognizing God’s mercy in their lives (and) recognizing the need for a faith community,” he said.

Mockmore, who has been out of prison for six years after serving 16, went to church as a child with his grandparents. But he didn’t develop a “relationship” with his faith until much later.

“It was just a show to me,” Mockmore said of his childhood church-going habits. “It was just the thing to do. Because my grandparents did it, I did it.”

But he remembers the exact date when it “all clicked.”

“When I finally gave over my life, when I finally sold out to Christ, was March 29th of 2010, when I was baptized,” Mockmore said.