

## Prison Journal No. 4, April 6, 2006

### Jackson County Jail

Just as we anticipated, Monday, April 3<sup>rd</sup> at 7 AM the word came, "Cordaro, roll up." I left Pottawattamie County Jail with what I brought in with me. All the correspondence I had received the past 40 days was trashed. All the books I had sent in to me stayed in Pottawattamie County including my Divine Office. A check was cut for the money I had on my books, less the \$25 for the last order I made but never received. So it goes...

The US Marshals picked up four of us from Pottawattamie County and drove us to the Omaha Federal Court House where we met up with five other Federal inmates. A couple of hours later, a van from the Jackson County Jail in Holton, KS, came to pick us up. Shackled and handcuffed, nine of us were shuffled into the van. The van was rigged with a steel box divided in two from front to back by a thick steel wall with a long steel bench in each unit. Once entombed in this tight, dark, airless space for the 2 ½ hour drive, I sat by an inmate who lamented the whole time, "Not Jackson County! Dear God, say it ain't so!" He previously spent five months in the Jackson County Jail on his way to a Federal Penitentiary. A probation violation earned him a return trip and my first intro to the Jackson County Jail.

Located in Holton, KS, in the northeast corner of Kansas, 50 miles from Leavenworth, KS, and 90 from Kansas City, MO, the county seat, the Jackson County Jail serves as a holding facility for inmates from the Kansas City area and the Federal Bureau of Prisons. There are almost 120 inmates in this facility, less than 25 come from Jackson County. This jail is clearly a revenue-making enterprise for this poor rural Kansas county. Holton has less than 3,000 people and is the largest town in this county.

This is not uncommon across the country. Many poor rural counties are operating larger-than-they-need jails to serve as holding facilities for non-county inmates as a money-making project. And like most for-profit ventures, the bottom line sets the standard. Here at the Jackson County Jail that has meant cramming as many inmates into their jail as they can.

Here in "C" Mod, the unit where I am housed, that has meant the original two-man cells are rigged to house three men. I'm in a jail cell two-thirds the size of the Pottawattamie County jail cell I just left with two other guys and we're sleeping on a three slab bunk bed.

I must confess I was a bit taken back my first night here. I've been assigned the bottom bunk that has no more than a two foot clearance from the middle bunk. I tried sleeping in this small space the first night but had a panic claustrophobic attack. With permission from my two cell mates, I set up my thin sleeping mat on the floor up against the door along side the toilet. That's where I'm sleeping now.

The small window in our cell is boarded up so no sunlight is allowed in the cell nor is there any sunlight in our dayroom which is half the size of the one I left at Pottawattamie County. The walls are painted purple and the light bulb in our cell is burned out. All we have for light is the dim night light. The first day I filled out an ICF, Inmate Communication Form, asking that the light be fixed. The guys in the unit wished me luck. The steel toilet-sink combo has a slow leak. My cellmate let the guards know some time ago but nothing has happened.

There are four steel tables with four small round steel seats attached. When we eat, eight of the 24 inmates eat standing up, sitting on the stairs leading to the second floor tier or in our rooms. Whenever I do use a steel seat at one of the tables, I need to sit on my thin blanket.

I'm not the hard-ass I used to be. The jail-issued clothes and bedding are so worn thin and raggedy that when I go to sleep I feel like I'm sleeping in "swaddling clothes." (Luke 2:7)

This is also one of the most unclean jails I've been in. The two-stall shower in our unit is scary. They give us no cleaning supplies to clean our cells. No access to paper towels. The hot water is tepid at best. The limited toilet paper we get must double as our paper towels. There are rumors of a staph infection going around in this jail. It's just a rumor yet it says something about the conditions here.

The strangest thing about our unit is that half of the eight cell doors do not work. They cannot be locked down. Our cell door's hinges are so badly bent that our door can't even be closed. With no guards in the unit as there was in Pottawattamie County, it raises issues of security and safety in my mind. We see guards seven times a day: three times a day to serve meals, twice for meds, and twice for head counts. These are the only times you can ask for things you need. The unit is supposed to be locked down between 1:30 pm and 4:30 pm and between 10:30 pm and 6 am. I say "supposed" because half the cell doors do not lock.

There is a rec space in the facility. It's the only place where I can get sunlight filtered through a fiberglass ceiling. It's a very small area. With a 4 on 4 basketball game going, no place is safe to even stand and watch. I went out once. The roughest basketball I've even seen. No fouls unless blood is drawn and anything off the walls is in play.

Another drawback for me is that there are no good books to read. The selection of books here makes Pottawattamie County Jail's books look like a fully stocked library. No books are allowed to be mailed in period. There is little room for walking. Most of the guys are happy with the food. That's because there is plenty of it. Problem for me is most of it is not good for me. There is no fresh fruit. All vegetables and fruit are canned. There is a lot of rice, pasta and potatoes and plenty of meat. They have a larger commissary selection than most county jails. From my perspective, it's a greater selection of bad food. And with no jail Chaplin, it's harder to get any spiritual issues addressed.

On the plus side, I get along with the guys in my unit. Most of us are Feds waiting to get assigned in the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) system. The average stay here for Feds is three months. I am again the oldest guy in the Mod. They call me "Pops". One cellmate is a 20-year-old kid from the Kansas City area doing 90 days for a marijuana charge. My other cellmate is a 30-year-old guy from Omaha doing a 12 year bit for drug dealing. They are both good to me.

The challenge for me there is the same challenge I will have wherever I'm placed: making the time work for me and not against me. Physically, I'm getting my heart meds and for this I am thankful. I am going to need to discipline my food intake and do the trading and food exchange necessary to eat what is good for me and get rid of what is not. Right now, I pass on bread and deserts for salads and some canned fruits and vegetables. I will need to be careful of what foods I buy from the commissary also. Once I buy a few pairs of socks from the commissary, I will start a walking regiment. It will be limited given the space and number of inmates yet I will need to do something.

Getting some good reading in is going to be a problem. It just ain't going to happen. I'm going to be getting the *New York Times* starting next week. This will be a big plus. I intend to keep my writing discipline going, writing a regular prison journal and my weekly lectionary reflections. Luckily, I'm a couple weeks ahead with my lectionary reflections. I'll need that

time to get a list of the weekly text sent to me. Right now I only have a copy of the King James Bible. I hope to get the Catholic New American translation.

Meeting my spiritual needs may be the biggest challenge I'm facing. It does not look like I will be able to get a Divine Office into this jail to pray. Being in a 3-man cell makes finding any alone time next to impossible. There are few religious programs offered and no jail Chaplin. Getting a clergy visit regularly is unlikely also. I do not know when the next time I will receive the Eucharist again. My hunger and desire for it grows. I did find a 2005 Advent/Christmas Mass Catholic Bilingual Missal with songs in the back half to sing to myself. They are mostly Advent and Christmas songs but I'll make the best of it.

Perhaps the best thing I've got going for me is the possibility of doing one on one ministry. There seems to be a good comradeship with the guys in my Mod right now. The population here is 40% Black, 40% White and the rest Hispanic and American Indian. We all seem to get along well in this hard place. And my past experience tells me that the longer I'm in any one place, the more opportunity I have for one on one ministry. And, I guess the hardest thing about leaving Pottawattamie County is leaving the close relationships I was developing there. I was hoping to write this journal entry on the subject of my social communal relationships in Pottawattamie County Jail. My sudden transfer changed all that. I will try to write about this in a future journal.

Today is a special anniversary for the Cordaro Family. April 6, 1969, Easter Sunday morning, we lost our dad, George, to a heart attack. Just another reminder for me of how blessed and lucky I am to have had such a great father who loved me so unconditionally and set the mark for me of what being a good and faithful man is supposed to be.

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