

Remembering Sister Joan Sawyer

Sr Rose Gallagher Dec 13th, 2022

Sr Joan Sawyer

Sr Joan Sawyer was a Columban Sister who was killed with seven prisoners at Lurigancho Prison, Lima, Peru on 14 December 1983 after being caught up in a hostage crisis. As prisoners and hostages tried to leave the prison in an ambulance, police fired a hail of bullets and stopped them. Another Columban sister who knew her well, reflects on her life and death.



*"Keep in mind those who are in prison
as though you were in prison with them
and those who are being badly treated
since you too are in the one body".*

Hebrews 13:3.

*"May the groans of the captive reach you,
by your mighty arm rescue those doomed to die".*

Psalm: 79.

As we seek to understand and respond in caring and transformative ways to the plight of suffering humanity in our war-torn, suffering world of today, we find ourselves needing to draw on inspirational sources for the courage to commit with love and fidelity whatever the cost. Such sources can be our mystics, martyrs, poets, our artists and perhaps others whose lives are more hidden.

On 14 December of this year, we will be remembering one of these - Sr Joan Sawyer. She gave her 'all', seeking to bring justice and dignified treatment to those abandoned to their fate in Lurigancho prison, a place cruelly overcrowded with 6,000 inmates in a prison built to cater for 1,600.

And while we can draw inspiration from Joan's life poured out for these prisoners, we see how she herself drew inspiration from the Scripture passages quoted above. She mentioned them in her stated desire to commence this needed ministry to those imprisoned whom she referred to as 'the poorest of the poor' in Lima.

For those of us who were privileged to know Joan and her ministry in Peru, we can attest to the blessedness of littleness being leaven and light.

Joan was of small stature, suffered poor health and struggled with fluency in Spanish but she also revealed an unwavering tenacity in addressing injustices.

In Joan's direct encounters with those 'at the bottom of the pile' a gentleness and tenderness characterised her approach as remembered and shared by one of the prisoners who survived on that fateful day - "Her spirit of kindness and sacrifice toward us prisoners will be my most precious memory".

The journey for Joan into the lives and hearts of the Lurigancho prisoners would seem to have begun by Joan being gifted with a deep compassion for those burdened by the indignities which were the lot of the poor. This, coupled with an acceptance of the cross at various stages of her own life, seemed to endow her with a capacity to identify easily with the 'little and the lost' ... the ability indeed, to 'hear the groans of the prisoners' ... 'keeping in mind those who are in prison as though she was in prison with them'.

The writer, Diarmud O'Murchu speaks of the Kingdom of God as "Empowering Companionship" and that is what we see happening through Joan's relational ways with the prisoners in her care. The way she identified with them in their suffering, proved to be transformative, instilling in them an unbreakable HOPE, a belief in their innate goodness and dignity and a desire to live in freedom once again.

One of the prisoners, Alejandro (nick-named Cri-Cri) would write:

"I want to die outside this prison

Surrounded by silence and freedom,

Without the noise of padlocks

Without the tears of pain

Without voices that resound in the night

When they call me to face my calvary.

Without cold, without hunger

Without fear, without pity

I want to die outside of this prison

and bring with me, as a leaflet in my heart

the gentle breeze of my liberty"

Sadly, Alejandro would be numbered among the seven prisoners who died with Joan prompting someone to remark: 'Joan took by the hand her seven brothers and brought them with her into heaven'.

Joan would be remembered with an enduring love by the prisoners for the life-giving way she mingled, mixed and cared for them, taking up their cause, defending their dignity, representing their cases in the courts, leading them in Liturgies and in Gospel reflections on God's unconditional love for those forgotten and ill-treated by society. A mural paid for by the prisoners themselves after the death of Joan and their seven companions bore the encouraging caption: "Joan you will live on in the hearts of your people".

In seeking to be Gospel witnesses in today's world, wisdom pathways would seem to guide us toward allowing ourselves be 'tilled and harrowed' as Joan was. The poet Patrick Kavanagh in 'To the Man after the Harrow' states:

"For destiny will not fulfil

Unless you let the harrow play"

And maybe this is precisely what we can learn from Joan's life and witness - it is in allowing the 'harrow play' in our own hearts and lives that makes it possible for us to hear the cry of the poor - capable of hearing the groans of the prisoners; of keeping them in mind as if we were in prison with them and thus being moved to compassionate commitment countering the evil still stalking the lives of too many in our world today.