

## Former Inmate Addresses Prison Chaplains with Message of Hope

by Denis Grasska

PASTORAL CENTER — When former juvenile inmate Pedro “Ricky” Alegre addressed members of the diocese’s jail chaplain certification program on April 9, his message was a simple one: God has a plan for everyone — even his lost sheep.

Following his arrest for a violent crime in 1997, Alegre initially had little interest in the lay chaplains visiting his prison. Their penchant for hugging and constant references to God’s love made him uneasy. But within two years, Alegre re-evaluated his life, letting go of his aggression and promising God that he would live as a true Christian. When he was paroled in 2003, he was a changed man.

“Ever since I made that one promise to God,” Alegre said, “not only have I tried not to deny him in words, but I’m trying hard not to deny him by my actions.”

Even though he was a baptized Catholic, Alegre thought little about his faith and even less about his future during his years as a teenage gang member on the streets of National City. When he was in eighth grade, Alegre had his first brush with the law. Far from scaring him straight, his arrest for drug possession gave him street credibility.

“My first visit to juvenile hall was like my first step in becoming a gangster,” said Alegre, 24. “It was my career, something I decided to get myself into.”

From drug possession, Alegre graduated to more serious crimes, such as burglarizing homes and stealing cars. Then came the moment that changed his life forever. When he was only 16, members of a rival gang arrived at his home and threatened him with a shotgun. Insulted by his rivals’ bravado, Alegre decided to strike back, meeting their threat with an act of violence.

“The first intention I had was to retaliate,” Alegre said. “Why? Because that was our motto.”

A month later, the police were knocking on Alegre’s front door.

As an inmate, he regularly fought with other inmates who cast him disrespectful glances or simply hailed from other neighborhoods. His prison yard brawls extended his sentence, but the added time didn’t faze him and neither did the threats of prison officials, who warned that he would be transferred to another facility if the fighting continued. Alegre continued to view his own life with indifference.

Then, when the situation seemed most desperate, he told his counselor that he would gladly take a job at the prison to keep himself busy and out of trouble. He accepted a janitorial position and was given the assignment of cleaning up the prison chapel.

Though he helped prepare the chapel for services, Alegre never participated in Masses or prayer services. He accepted an invitation to a three-day retreat primarily because of the menu,



*Pedro “Ricky” Alegre at the Diocesan Pastoral Center April 9.*



which was more than a cut above typical prison fare. He was still thinking more about his stomach than his soul, but things were about to change.

When the retreat broke into small prayer groups, Alegre was nervous at first, dreading the possibility of saying the wrong words. But, with the music playing and a cross in his hands, he found himself sincerely praying.

“I asked the Lord to help me, to let me know that he was there, to tell me that all the things these people were putting into my head were true and that he could give me whatever I needed to continue to know him and love him.”

From that moment on, Alegre committed himself to Christ. Slowly but surely, he grew in his faith, abandoning his gang’s code of violence and retaliation for the Church’s teachings of peace and forgiveness. He

lost his indifference and apathy and began to view the prison as a “tool shed with nothing but tools to offer me. It was up to me how to use them.”

Alegre treasures the words of Jeremiah 29:11, which he first heard at the retreat: “For I know well the plans I have in mind for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare, not for woe! Plans to give you a future full of hope.”

To even the casual observer, his new life bears the mark of Divine Providence.

Despite the difficulty of finding a job as a paroled felon, Alegre said he’s had steady employment since his release. While he was still in prison, a woman told him prophetically, “The Lord’s got a wife out there for you.” In December, he married Alina, whom he met at a Bible study.

Alegre delivered his speech as part of a full day of formation and reflection held at the Diocesan Pastoral Center. The formation seminar was designed to better prepare lay Catholic volunteers for the demands and rewards of prison ministry.

“Being in detention ministry, you don’t see what happens to them after they leave,” prison chaplain Frances Dickey said. “It’s nice to see that what we do is not just saying words that go out in the wind, but that it really does work.”

Chaplain Joe Lynch hopes that Alegre’s story will attract other lay Catholics to prison ministry. He’s already perfecting his pitch to potential chaplains.

“You have people who are so negative and full of hate,” he said, “and now they come back and they give these inspirational stories and you, too, can be a part of it.”

*For more information on prison ministry, contact Jim Walsh at (858) 490-8375 or visit [www.diocese-sdiego.org/detentionministry](http://www.diocese-sdiego.org/detentionministry).*