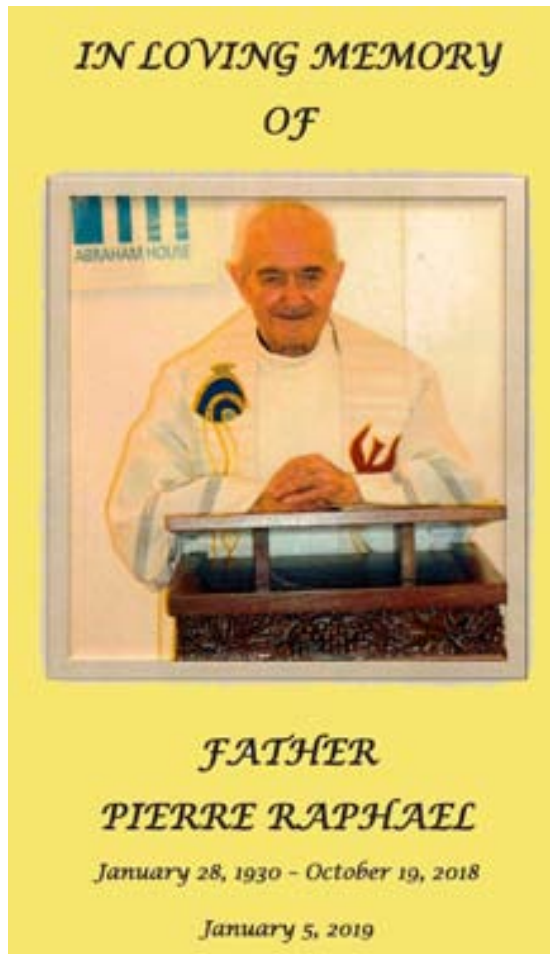


Remembering Unforgettable Father Pierre Raphael, Worker-Priest, Rikers Chaplain, an Abraham House Founder & Author of Books Excerpted on CorrectionHistory.Org website



Father Pierre (Peter) Raphael, retired Rikers chaplain, was remembered and his life celebrated Jan.5, Saturday afternoon at Abraham House, 340 Willis Ave, Bronx, which he helped found and where he served many years as spiritual director.

Fr. Raphael generously facilitated the Correction History Org website presenting extended excerpts from his books, "Inside Rikers Island" and "God Behind Bars" as well as materials on how correction officers, nuns and others started the alternative to incarceration facility for ex-offenders in the late 1980s / early 1990s.

The web-master for Correction History Org was honored to receive and readily accepted an invitation to

attend. The memorial rite was attended by more than 150, including approximately a dozen children.

The attendance of children was quite appropriate, given that the spirit of the occasion was not somber or sad, but celebratory and upbeat. The life of service for and with others rendered by this humbly holy man was the joyous focus of the event. It fit well with the Three Kings (Magi) Visit theme of the Christmastide mass offered. During the liturgy, children in procession carried flowers which they deposited in a box at the steps of the altar.



Images on this page:

Top left – Front of program card given to attendees.

Above right – Christmas tree and tripod holding placard featuring Fr. Raphael photo portrait 12 snapshots of him with others during various phases of his 88 years.

Bottom left – Manger scene under Christmas tree.

Abraham House
340 Willis Avenue
Bronx, NY 10454

PROGRAM

- ❖ *Welcome*
- ❖ *Opening Prayer*
- ❖ *Video Presentation- Introduction by Joelle Shefts*
- ❖ *Guest Speakers:*
 - *Teresa Gomez-Marquez*
 - *Alain Saihac*
 - *Severino Diaz*
 - *Samira Paulino*
 - *Sr. Mary Lanning*
- ❖ *Celebration of Mass*
- ❖ *Dinner*

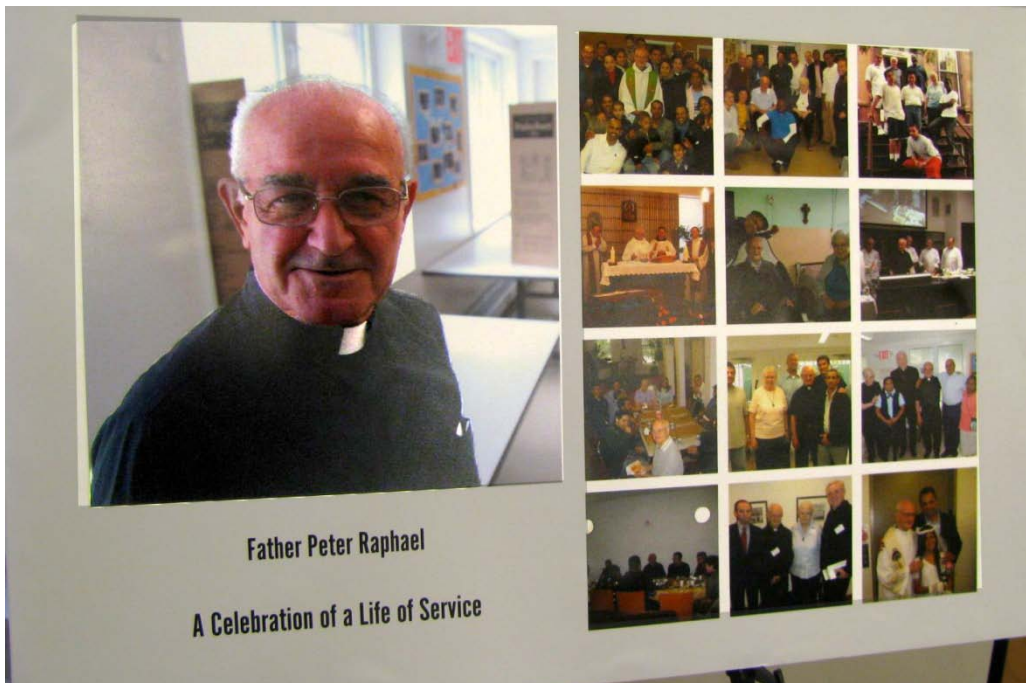
Althea Brooks, the facility's executive director, set the tone for the memorial services in her welcoming remarks. She noted that while some in the gathering knew Fr. Peter through working directly with him at Abraham House, many – if not most – in the gathering know him indirectly through the warm, welcoming, supportive, giving spirit he helped imbue into the place and its programs.



Images on this page:
Top left – Reverse side of program card given to attendees.
Above –Althea Brooks, right, executive director, pauses as Spanish interpetor translates of the welcoming remarks.
Below—Enlargement of main placard.

have been blessed by his life. The mood was positive, not down.

Peering over the shoulder of each speaker at the podium was, in a sense, Fr. Peter. His large portrait on the main placard in the upper room was displayed on a tripod behind the rostrum. If sitting close enough, a member of audience, as he or she listened to, and looked at each speaker, could possibly catch in the back-ground a glimpse of the priest's visage, depending upon the height, size, position and movement of the one speaking.



That audience member then might be tempted to muse how the post-humous honoree himself would view the on-going proceedings. It's conceivable, knowing

His priority on people and on love being humankind's most ennobling endeavor -- that he would reflect on the scene, see and sense the love which brought and bound these people together at Abraham House in God's loving presence. If he were so to consider the matter, he then would likely overcome his initial reluctance due to his humility, resign himself to join in and enjoy it . . . for the good of "The House."



Fr. Peter would be the first to insist he was only one of the founders of Abraham House. He would have approved of the front-of-the-room placement of another large placard on a tripod; this of the founding foursome photo also displayed

on one of the facility's website "Who We Are" pages. **The photo, *shown above*, features two key founders, Sister Simone Ponnet and Fr. Pierre (Peter) Raphael in the center, with co-founders, left and right, respectively, Sisters Rita Claus and Amy Henry.**

The printed program called for an "Opening Prayer" to follow the Welcome by Executive Director Brooks. The Prayer, written by Sister Mary Lanning, was delivered by her. **(In the photo right, SisterMary holds and reads her Opening Prayer as Ms. Brooks looks on.)**



Listed next on the printed program card was a Video Presentation by Joelle Shefts, a shortened version of her much longer documentary about Fr. Peter and Abraham House.

The documentarian, a San Antonio, Texas, native, recalls her early childhood days as "solitary and often unstructured . . . drawing and trawling through illustrated books."

Among her earliest memories are certain images, haunting illustrations for Grimm's Fairy Tales and books in her father's library on Diego Rivera, Picasso, Leger, Benin, and Da Vinci. At 7 she studied drawing and painting at the McNay Institute of Fine Arts and at 11 was apprenticed to a sculptor. At 14, she discovered NYC's Metropolitan Museum. It became her second home where she delved into Medieval and Islamic art. During that same period, Jolle was studying drawing at the Art Student's League and, later, entered Pratt Institute.

After graduation, while working for Ch.13 in NYC, she learned basics of filmmaking and produced some documentaries, winning various honors in the process, and eventually embarking on a solo multi-faceted career. Visit Joelle's website's biographical "About" page at <http://www.joelleshefts.com/home/about> for

more on her fascinating artistic life's journey.



Images on this page:

Left -- Sister Simone Ponnet tells in the video how when she and Fr. Peter were chaplains at different facilities on Rikers Island and began discussing how they might develop an alternative-to-incarceration program to help offenders turn their lives around.

Below -- Joelle Shefts speaks of her Fr. Peter documentary.

Among the themes that the documentarian Joelle Shefts stressed in her remarks was the power of Fr. Peter's infectious

example of caring faith in action and of his probing faith poured out in words, both moving people's hearts and minds. His life embodied and expressed a faith in God's love so deeply that it lifted the souls of those blessed to have encountered him. Still this humble holy man was quite human. In his zeal to accomplish goals for Abraham House, sometimes he had little patience with wasting energy and time on outward non-essentials and polite euphemisms.

The extensive excerpts from Fr. Peter's *Inside Rikers Island* and *Gold Behind Bars* appearing on the CorrectionHistory.Org website include many instances where his straight forward directness can come across profoundly blunt.

The next five pages will be devoted to selections from the website's *Inside Rikers Island* excerpts. Interspersed among the excerpts will be a continuation of the series of photos taken by this webmaster at the Abraham House memorial service Jan. 5 remembering Fr. Peter. Mostly, the memorial service photos in this 10-page presentation appear in the chronological order in which they were taken.





Below begins excerpts of the Correction History website's excerpts from **Fr. Pierre Raphael's** *Inside Rikers Island: A Chaplain's Search for God*:

“BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

“How strange -- a Frenchman as chaplain of a New York City jail? A priest produced by the Mission de France and years of close association with the Brothers of Charles de Foucauld? Why? How? . . . Here in New York I find myself so far from what I am and at the same time so close to what I have always sought But

since Rikers, I will never cease to believe in surprises.

“I come from a small city in south central France called Millau (20,000 inhabitants) My paternal grandfather was raised by public assistance, his own parents were unknown. I have carried that about with me for a long time as a kind of ‘rupture,’ and I am still convinced that it bore a lot of weight in my orientation toward prison work. . . .

“. . . with my father's assistance [I] found my first job as a night operator at the central telephone office in Millau. So, from the period of my adolescence, I experienced solitude, working while others slept, resting while others worked. I had time to read and reflect. . . .

Images on this page:
 Above – Teresa Gomez-Marquez, former Deputy Director, Abraham House, listed guest speaker.

 Right – Alain Sailhac, world renowned chef, Fr. Peter friend and fellow countryman, listed guest speaker.

Many times I used to go out on the balcony and look at the stars, loving, without being able to explain it very

clearly to myself, the harmony, reverence and profusion of the heavens. I could think long thoughts, and it was at that time that a choice gradually took shape in me. Since childhood the idea of being a missionary had preoccupied me. . . .



“During my term of military service (18 months in Morocco in 1950-51, in peacetime), and with the advice of a priest friend, I made the final decision to enter the seminary. . . . I loved the Brothers of Charles de Foucauld, founded by Father Voillaume, and knew their contemplative immersion in the poor



areas of the world through manual labor and prayer. I also loved the Mission de France, a society of priests founded just after World War II by the archbishop of Paris, Cardinal Suhard, who formed teams of priest workers in factories and workshops, in hand-to-hand combat with unbelief.

“The Mission attracted me and, in the end, that is where I went. . . . In 1961 I was ordained a priest in the Mission de France at Pontigny (about 100 miles from Paris). It was at a crucial moment for the church: John XXIII had been elected three years earlier, and instead of having a transitional pope, we found ourselves in the conciliar spring.

“I was initially sent to the south, very close to the Spanish frontier. We were a team of three priests including Jean, Cardinal Etchegaray's brother. We did a lot of reflection and pastoral work with tourists, for the countryside is magnificent and very full of people during the summer. I remained there very happily for three years. From the gentle Pyrenees I was transferred to the harsh climate of Limousin in central France, to Ambazac, near Limoges. It is a traditional, hardworking region, de-Christianized and even anticlerical. . . . We were four priests in a crowded community of life, parish work and manual labor. I took care of catechism, celebrated Mass and the sacraments and was also a welder in a small shop. . . .

Images on this page:

Above – Severino Diaz, ex-inmate who spent 25 years behind prison bars and visited Peter (his “spiritual father”) in the French nursing home where the ex-Rikers chaplain spent his last years.

Right – Sister Mary Lanning, founder of YesSolutions, activist nun.

“For me, at the same time, there occurred

a very furtive reawakening of an old and compelling attraction toward the spirituality of Charles de Foucauld, the converted soldier turned monk who was assassinated in 1916 in the sands of the African Sahara. . . . I was approaching the age of 40 and for me it was almost like a return to zero. Thanks to Father Voillaume I was sent to a novitiate in Italy, at Spello near Assisi. This novitiate included a period of three months in the desert where Charles de Foucauld lived. . . The sky had a total purity and the stars were clear. . . . We had some memorable nights of . . . prayer,



completely useless, absolutely necessary - the gratuity, the risk, the danger, the splendor of God.

“It was there, in the desert, at the beginning of the '70s, far from all the convulsions of urban life, that I found myself being asked to go to New York. It was a question of joining the team of three brothers already settled in Fourth Street near the Bowery on the Lower East Side.
. . . .



“Thus it was with this two-fold past, as a worker-priest and a

Brother of the Gospel, that I arrived in New York on Christmas Eve 1970, only for the purpose of living in community. My first vital link with America was the melodies of the midnight Mass. . . . Sung in this

Images on this page:

Above – Board member Fr. Eric Cruz point in homily.
Below -- Attendees stand at key point in liturgy.

little church on Washington Square, in a packed and united throng, it was still the same celebration, the same festal assembly. Even though I arrived in New York as a total stranger,

when I was praying in the church with these women and men I was not completely uprooted. . . .

“We were then living close to the Bowery in two small apartments, one of which was our chapel. This was my first, brutal contact with the marginal people in this "monster" city. . . .

“In that old section of Manhattan, the phrase from a book by a Jewish author: ‘If God does not exist, what happens to suffering? My God, it would all be lost . . .’ weighed on my



spirit, as did that other expression of Bernanos: ‘Human suffering is the miracle of the universe.’ Although I really do not understand Bernanos' statement very well, if at all, if it has any real and concrete meaning, it can be nothing else but the truth of Easter. . . .



“If prayer played an important part in the life of the Brotherhood, so did work, the manual labor that was both a necessity for survival and also a means of social insertion depending on opportunities, of which there was no lack. All four of us brothers were kept busy. I was a messenger, carpenter, maintenance worker, welder, orderly in a nursing home, and a medical aide in a detoxification center before I finally ended up at Rikers Island in 1980. . . .

“The most notable result for me personally would be, undoubtedly, my reintegration into the Mission de France.

Images on this page:
 After mass, three persons not listed on program, spoke:
 1st, left -- Samira Paulino. 2nd, below -- Carmen Ortiz.

“All this was made possible, of course, by the kindness and hospitality of the diocese of Brooklyn, where I have been living since 1982. . . .

“Prayer is a vital necessity in prison. If I did not pray, I would atrophy. If I did not have an interior knowledge of why I am there, day after day, I would die. But it is also the prison that speaks to me of the Mission, in every one of the realities into which it immerses me, through the encounter with flesh and blood human beings. At Rikers it has all begun to make sense for me. . . .”

“ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

“. . . Although this is a personal account, my work is not a one-man show. I cannot let the written word outside Rikers Island take over the spoken word inside. Because this book deals with a collective reality, it must include all the people I am with. It is only through all of us that this book can make sense.

“I belong to a team. There is Sister Simone, administrative chaplain at House of Detention for Men (HDM). A much larger book would be needed to express the ongoing transformation inside HDM and elsewhere in Rikers Island through the vision and activity of this sister. Talk to Department of Corrections employees, inmates and their families and you will see. . . . If little by little we have created a kind of supple structure that permits the



existence of a community and a church behind bars, . . . then it is certain that much of the credit belongs to Sister Simone.



“The team also includes Sister Amy. She has been a volunteer for so many years. Sister Amy is extremely attentive to the sick inmates, those with AIDS as well as the others, always ready for any possible way to help. There is Carmen, who works in her quiet way with inmates' families, and Rita, who is busy at a Detox Center but always attuned to the prison.

There are Brothers Pat and Maurice from the Little Brothers of the Gospel. Their willing,

open presence has always been a gift.

“There are our friends from the Catholic Worker and the volunteers from Brooklyn's parishes in Williamsburg. All are powerful witnesses for our people at Rikers. There is Kenneth Hoffarth, Director of the Office of Criminal Justice at the Archdiocese of New York. Many times his help and expertise have been instrumental. I consider him a part of the team. I cannot forget also my fellow chaplains in the prison ministry. I hope one day we all will be one together.

“I want to give thanks from my head and from my heart for our team ministry In preparing this book I am grateful to several people who were a real help to me: first, to my friend Robert Ellsberg from Orbis Books, who invited me and welcomed this story; to Bill Griffin from the Catholic Worker, who read the manuscript with me; to Joe Cunneen from Cross Currents, with whom I had substantial talks; to Fr. Tom Clarke, S.J., who always had good advice; to Joan Marie Laflamme, who copyedited the manuscript and made positive suggestions; and also to my translator, Linda Maloney, who did a very good job, in the opinion of my American friends.

“I have a brother. His name is Bill Mountain. He is a Jesuit. In many ways his search for God has been and still is an inspiration to me as I carry on at Rikers. I cannot omit him. Neither can I forget my far-away friend, Henry Tincq, a journalist at the Paris newspaper Le Monde. He came to Rikers Island three years ago. From his trip a book was published in France that we wrote together. I have benefited richly from his insight.

“Last but not least, I would like to give thanks to God through those who are or were in Rikers Island, and with whom I experienced or continue to experience the shining part of the journey. If this little book has a soul, it is theirs.

Images on this page:

Left –Tom McCarthy, Correction History webmaster, 3rd unlisted speaker.

Below – CorrectionHistory.Org website crafted graphic pen sketch of Fr. Peter based on photo in the October 20, 2018 issue of the French publication Midi Libre Millau reporting his passing in a nursing home situated in that community.



Links: to [Abraham House history pieces \(1986 – 2004\)](#) to [Inside Rikers Island](#) to [God Behind Bars](#) to: *Catholic Worker Editor Recalls 'Dear Friend' Fr. Pierre* to: [CorrectionHistory.Org home page](#)