

My name is Andrei Belei. I was 21 when I came to the United States alone from then still Soviet Ukraine, hoping to build a new life. I was 24 when I started using drugs, committed murder, and was sentenced to life without parole in prison. I am 50 now.

It took me some time to adjust to life in maximum-security institutions with all their violence and restrictive conditions. One thing that kept weighing on me, in addition to guilt and shame, was how alone I was. The proverbial stranger in a strange land: foreign language, foreign customs, foreign faiths. I have some friends outside, family back in Ukraine, and I got along with my neighbors pretty well but there was that emptiness inside that I couldn't quite fill.

Until, about 10 years ago, a friend recommended that I get in touch with Orthodox Christian Prison Ministry. Without exaggeration, that changed my life. I developed a much better understanding of our faith, discovered the beautiful depth of patristic writings, felt the profoundly warm sense of peace when I read St. Isaac the Syrian. I learned from the correspondence courses OCPM offered, beginning with the Catechism and on to the Preaching of the Apostles and the Search for Truth. I received priceless gifts of books, among them the Study Bible which by now looks like it's been studied a lot over the years. Because it has. I find wisdom and inspiration in daily meditations of Dynamis.

And then there are Fr. Duane's weekly postcards with awesome (and sometimes adorable) views of the beauty of the Lord's creation. Some of them have inspired me to paint, others gave me a good chuckle, and there are always a few hangin by my bunk and inside

my locker. I am sincerely grateful for the kind and always personal letters from Fr. Duane and Zossima, and of course for the prayers for me and my loved ones.

I am not alone. Through the patient and compassionate presence of OCPM in my life, I feel the presence of the Church and the light of the Lord that shines even on this sinner, into this dark depth. The Ministry has helped me find peace, purpose, hope. I will never get out of prison but I know that I can live a life of peace and compassion no matter where I am; I can serve others; I can share the light. Every day, as I get up before 4:00 a.m. to pray, I have a long list of reasons to thank the Almighty Lord. OCPM is high on that list.

I am grateful to Fr. Duane, Zossima, and everyone who has been making Orthodox Christian Prison Ministry possible. I very much hope you will never know first hand how much it means to people like me so please take my word for it: it means the world.

Thank you.