

## Faith & Life – Respect

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### WHAT ABOUT US GRILS?

In New York City, the subway is a popular place for artistic expression. Graffiti can be found on walls and even on the trains themselves.

On one wall, someone had painted a picture of a man and a woman facing each other. A while later, another artist came along and put a speech bubble over the man's head. It read "I love girls", or at least that's what the artist intended. But he'd made a spelling error and instead of 'girls' he had written 'grils'. Not too long after that, another graffiti artist wrote on top of the bubble "It's not grils, dummy, it's girls. I love girls." Soon another illustrator joined the conversation and wrote "But what about us grils?"

Cindy was 16 years old and lived in the shadow of her friend Samantha. Sam was gorgeous – long blonde hair, nice body, beautiful eyes – and all the boys liked her. Cindy had acne, she was overweight and her teeth were crooked. Time after time her friend would get invited out to dates and parties but Cindy never did. When prom night came, Cindy was at home, staring out the window, with tears streaming down her face. Her question was, "What about us grils?"

To write an article on respect, one has to write about grils.

Respect is easily given to the beautiful people, those who play by the rules, or those who we like and admire. However when the issue of respect is in jeopardy it is most often in reference to grils.

How do we engage those we don't like? How do we treat the marginalized?

I work as a chaplain in prisons. I see grils every day and in my environment the issue of respect or lack thereof is everywhere.

At the heart of much criminal activity and offences is the issue of respect, or disrespect. To commit a crime and hurt another is an act of disrespect. To arrest an individual and manhandle him by using excessive force is disrespect. To stand before a judge knowing you are guilty and plead innocent is disrespect. To incarcerate a person and treat them like an animal is disrespect. When we do not take into account the victims' needs and the trauma they endure, that is disrespectful.



Prison is a violent place and much of that violence comes when a person is feeling “dissed,” or disrespected. To be disrespected is to be dehumanized, to be made to feel worthless. Nothing enrages a person more than this.

In my work as a prison chaplain I see men like Philip, who was arrested for break and entry. When my fellow citizens read the news about his incarceration, the normal response is almost always the same. “Proper thing – throw away the key. Teach the idiot a lesson.”

I have to admit, at one point I felt the same. Then I met men like Philip. I heard their story of abuse and neglect. I hear about parents who were addicts, drunkards, violent or absent. I hear of a child having no reference point for values, no guidance other than, “Don’t trust anyone.” I see a young man whose mentors taught him by word or action that you control people with violence, that self-preservation is the highest virtue, and everyone else be damned.

When you don’t know their story, it is easy to write off Philip and his kind as a nuisance and not worthy of respect.

Would it help to know that his father beat him since he was three, or that his mother was mentally ill and never cared for him properly? Did you know that he went to school hungry most days or that if he opened a book at home his father would tell him he was a sissy for reading? Would you feel a little more empathy and respect for him if you knew that at six years old he was forced to go to school with a back pack full of drugs to exchange for an identical back pack full of money from another six year old?

I have found that most of my clients deemed brutal by the media were first brutalized by the people entrusted to love them.

So what about those girls? Do they deserve respect?

Let’s let one with more authority answer that:

“Then the king will reply to them, ‘I assure you that when you have done it for one of the least of these brothers and sisters [GRILS] of mine, you have done it for me.’” (Matt 25: 40)

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