

In Prison with Thomas Keating

By Judith Koock Strassman

There is really no way to describe this phenomenon—Centering Prayer in Folsom State Prison. You would have to experience it yourself. I wish with all my heart that you get the chance.

Fr. Thomas came to see for himself how his teachings were able to flower here in the harsh setting of the California prison system. Harsh setting – that's an understatement. Folsom has been dedicated to incarceration since 1880. High, cold, stone-gray walls, rolled barbed wire, towers, guards, search lights, surveillance cameras, high powered rifles with telescopes, heavy barred doors – 4,000 men walled in with anger, bitterness, self-loathing, and ineffable sadness.

Yet ironically, it is not unlike a monastery: individual cells, restricted access to the outside world, minimal life comforts, and unquestioned obedience to the rules. The only thing missing is the quiet. And often it is the promise of quiet that first attracts inmates to try Centering Prayer – then the tiny glimmer of hope that a loving God is reaching out to them.

For a new inmate, when the shock hits that they're really being locked up to do a significant amount of time behind these walls, the feelings of disbelief, fear, and panic are overwhelming. Just getting used to the regimen, the severe restriction on one's ability to say anything about anything, the level of unrelenting noise. Just getting used to being locked in with another man in a 4x8 cell designed for one, with zero personal space, zero privacy. Just getting used to the endless rules and their strict enforcement – the written rules of the system and, even more critical, the unwritten rules of the yard. Infractions bring swift and painful punishment. The prison world is so alien that new inmates, called "fish", are put into a separate prison bloc until they learn to adjust.

Prison has nothing to do with rehabilitation. A man who realizes he must change his life has almost no options here. The few rehab programs offered are booked solid, their waiting lists jammed. That leaves only self-help – but how? What method? Most guys just settle in and grind out their time – time that is black, endless, unrelieved monotony. When they are released, nothing about them has changed. And in a flash, something happens they swore never would: they are back in prison again, serving another lengthy sentence.

There is no way that Centering Prayer should show up here. It is impossible. Inconceivable. But it has happened – is happening. Four hundred men are doing their daily practice in Folsom Prison.

It began with individual men, searching on their own for relief, trying different forms of meditation and practicing alone in their cells. One man, serving a life sentence, found a quiet room in the loft of the chapel, a rare commodity. He used it as his place of meditation. Another lifer happened to walk in on him one day, asked what he was doing, and they began meditating together. Other men began to filter in.

Then, from the outside, came Mike Kelley who had been a volunteer for prisons for a few years. His spiritual advisor had given him Open Mind, Open Heart and, after a time of solo Centering Prayer, Mike began looking for a group to center with. Brain storm! Why not form a centering group in prison where the chance of stable membership was guaranteed.

It takes forever to get permission, space, clearance, and proper documentation through the system. But finally, there was Mike, meeting in the upstairs room of the chapel, teaching the small group of lifers Fr.

Thomas' guidelines. Would it be accepted? Would it take? Each man had his own belief system – Sufi, Christian Scientist, non-Christian – and his own preferred mode of meditation. They called a meeting to decide – and voted unanimously that Centering Prayer was the one method most compatible with their diversity.

It did take. The men, now calling themselves "The Contemplative Fellowship", began to meet for Centering Prayer on Friday evenings. Mike brought in Fr. Thomas' videos and books. As far as he figured, it was set. They could just meet like that from then on.

But Spirit had other ideas. The group began to grow.

Amazingly, it was the prison setting itself that fused and fueled the burgeoning fellowship. This is not easy to explain – prison life is so condensed, so concentrated – physically and psychologically. A man has so much time to think, to think about what he reads, about what he's heard, to discuss these ideas in close and frequent conversation with other minds he will know/live with for the foreseeable future. A visitor from the outside is stunned to find that such deep and thoughtful minds reside here. And too, because it is impossible to shut out or ignore the strident noise that is constant – often obscene and vicious yelling – he learns not to contend with it but to make it integral to his practice. This takes centering deeper. And because during his lifetime, he has seen every con, heard every hype, run every game – and here, for the first time in his life, he has found what is true, real, and unassailable. This makes his practice of Centering Prayer something like ferocious. Certainly uncompromising.

When Centering is this deep, the healing that results borders on revolutionary. This by their own admission. When they speak of what's happened to them since beginning their practice, it's in an awed voice – how the furious flood of hateful and revengeful thoughts has subsided, how they've begun to lengthen the fuse on their anger, how for first time they have accessed an inner quiet, and a peace they never knew possible. How, when they begin to look back objectively on their lives, they can see how they got here. And how they've come to feel that they belong to a brotherhood, a fellowship where, through love, they are healing one another.

These members of the Contemplative Fellowship stand out in the prison setting. Their attitude of peace, their smiling faces cause fellow inmates to wonder, to watch, and finally to ask, "What's going on with you, man?" The group was growing.

It was at a critical point. In prison, the code that governs inmate to inmate relations is as rigid as it is inhumane. In the yard, Whites don't mix with Blacks, neither mixes with Hispanics who themselves are divided into four distinct gangs, each with its own rules. Territory is defined, and boundaries are inviolable. Men here learn this very quickly.

But Contemplative Fellowship seemed immune to these distinctions. Everyone wanted in. And in an unprecedented gathering of the gang leaders, held in the chapel, the Fellowship lifers asked that the Centering Prayer meeting on Friday nights be ruled neutral turf, allowing anyone in who wanted in. The gang leaders said yes.

On Friday evenings, in the chapel in Folsom, sit a circle of men of every race, religion and background. Their eyes are closed (very scary for inmates to learn to do). In the five years they have been meeting, there has never been an incident.

What Every Catholic Should Know About the Death Penalty

Scripture and the Death Penalty

In *A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death*, the bishops explain the scriptural roots of Catholic teaching on the death penalty. This begins with the story of creation which teaches “that every life is a precious gift from God (see Gn 2:7, 21-23). This gift must be respected and protected. We are created in God’s image and redeemed by Jesus Christ, who himself was crucified.”

The bishops also explain “some argue that biblical statements about ‘life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth’ (see Ex 21:23-25, Lv 24:17, Dt 19:21) require that the death penalty be used for certain crimes. A correct interpretation of these passages indicates, however, that the principal intent of such laws was to limit the retribution that could be exacted for an offense, not to require a minimum punishment. Furthermore, it is important to read individual passages in the context of Sacred Scripture as a whole. While the Old Testament includes some passages about taking the life of one who kills, the Old Testament and the

teaching of Christ in the New Testament call us to protect life, practice mercy, and reject vengeance.”

From a Victim’s Family...

“No one in our family ever wanted to see the killer of our brother and his wife put to death. We felt instinctively that vengeance wouldn’t alleviate our grief. We wanted this murderer in prison so he could never hurt another person. But wishing he would suffer and die would only have diminished us and shriveled our own souls. Hatred doesn’t heal. Every time the state kills a person, human society moves in the direction of its lowest, most base urges. We don’t have to make that choice. Our lawmakers have the capacity to help us abolish the death penalty and along with it, the fantasy that it will make the pain go away.”

—Mary Bosco Van Valkenburg, whose brother and sister-in-law were murdered

Catholic Teaching and the Death Penalty

Catholic teaching offers a unique perspective on crime and punishment. It begins with the recognition that the dignity of the human person applies to both victims and offenders. It affirms our commitment to comfort and support victims and their families, while acknowledging the God-given dignity of every human life, even those who do great harm.

Catholic teaching on human life is rooted in the belief

I renew the appeal I made most recently at Christmas for a consensus to end the death penalty, which is both cruel and unnecessary . . .

*Pope John Paul II,
St. Louis, Missouri, January 27, 1999*

that all life is a gift from God that must be respected and defended from conception to natural death. In his encyclical *The Gospel of Life*, the Holy Father challenges followers of Christ to be “unconditionally pro life.” He reminds us that “the dignity of human life must never be taken away, even in the case of someone who has done great evil. Modern society has the means of protecting itself, without definitively denying criminals the chance to reform” (*Gospel of Life*, 27).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains that “the traditional teaching of the Church does not exclude recourse to the death penalty, if this is the only possible

way of effectively defending human lives against the unjust aggressor. If, however, non-lethal means are sufficient to defend and protect people’s safety from the aggressor, authority will limit itself to such means” (CCC, 2267). The test of whether the death penalty can be used is not the gravity of the offense, but whether it is absolutely necessary to protect society. The *Catechism* adds that today “the cases in which the execution of the offender is an absolute necessity ‘are very rare, if not practically non-existent’” (CCC, 2267).

The Catholic bishops of the United States have spoken out clearly and strongly against the use of the death penalty. In 1999 they issued *A Good Friday Appeal to End the Death Penalty*. They explained their opposition to the death penalty is based on more than concern for “what it does to those guilty of horrible crimes but for what it does to all of us as a society.” In 2005 they issued *A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death*. They acknowledged that sentences such as “life in prison without parole” provide non-lethal alternatives and called for an end to the use of the death penalty in the United States, stating “it is time for our nation to abandon the illusion that we can protect life by taking life.”

Ending the death penalty would be one important step away from a culture of death and toward building a culture of life.

United States Catholic Bishops, 2005 A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death