The World Community for Christian Meditation

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Meditation and Social Justice --Prison Ministry

I began my meditation journey in my late teens, but gave it up almost completely as an adult with a demanding job and a family of four young sons. By the grace of God, about 20 years ago I found meditation again, and, along with my wife, I am now part of the Houston WCCM community.

My meditation practice has helped me to see that of the many things the Gospels teach, the most important are social justice and prayer. In his teaching Jesus puts great emphasis on feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger (read ?immigrant?), clothing the naked, and visiting those in prison. He spent many all-night vigils in prayer and meditation, and He encourages us to meditate: ?But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.? Matthew 6:6

Social Justice is important, but it will be effective only if done with a prayerful spirit. For the last ten years, my personal focus on social justice has been on prison ministry. I go one Saturday each month to the Huntsville, Texas state prison, and I spend part of the day teaching meditation to the inmates. I would never have had the courage to begin this ministry, or to continue it without meditation.

Inspired by my experience at Huntsville, earlier this year I wrote to the Catholic Chaplain at the Ramsey Unit Prison Unit in Rosharon, Texas and asked if he would be interested in a *weekly* meditation group with the inmates. I stated that the group would be open to all inmates regardless of religion, or lack thereof, but that the format was definitely Christian with a Catholic focus. I would use the gospel passage for the upcoming Sunday Mass for the Lectio Divina portion of the meeting.

The chaplain immediately called me upon getting my letter. He said it was literally an answer to prayers because he needed to fill in some spaces in his schedule for the inmates. I asked him how many inmates he thought would be interested. He said 65. I was flabbergasted. I was expecting six at the most. He said the reason the number was so high was that the Ramsey Unit was one of the 30 state prisons that has a ?faith based dorm, ? set up to give special spiritual training to the 65 men in that particular dorm. He said all of them wanted to come, and the Christian based approach would be no problem.

I was overjoyed that 65 men *wanted* to come. I worried that attending the meetings might be mandatory for those in the faith based dorm, but felt that even if it is, certainly something good would come of it. I am I am happy to report that the large group has been very receptive to meditation. Inmates have told me that through participation in our group, their meditation practice is deepening and becoming more meaningful.

My ministry, like all ministries, has successes and failures. Only God can judge, but to all appearances many of the inmates have undergone a true conversion. Here?s an example of ?Jerome? (not his real name) with whom I have been working with for over ten years. When he first came into prison he was quite aggressive. As he put it, ?I was at the top of the food chain.? Now ?Jerome? is in a prison hospital, and he recently described the last two weeks of life of his cell mate who was so weak that he could not feed himself. ?Jerome? took it upon himself to feed him. After a few days the nurses told Jerome that death was imminent for his cellmate, so at 12:30 am Jerome made a pot of coffee in his cell and watched over his friend all night whispering to him and praying for him. The man died peacefully at 7:38 am.

?Jerome? knew that the prison authorities would send an official notice of death to the man?s family, but the letter would be cold and formal. So ?Jerome? wrote a personal letter to the inmate?s mom, describing his peaceful death and how at 8:15 the sun was coming up and the warm sunlight fell across her son?s face, and that there were even some birds chirping on the window as he died.

?Jerome? had a conversion. His long years of prayer and meditation had softened his heart. My long years of prayer and meditation have brought me many rewards, and the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of my incarcerated brothers such as ?Jerome.? I can honestly say that I have received as much (or even more) than they have from my practice.

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