

Jesuit death row chaplain: 'We allow revenge to ruin many lives'

Sr. Camille D'Arienzo | Apr. 15, 2014 Conversations with Sr. Camille

Jesuit Fr. George Williams

Age: 56

Profession: Death row chaplain at San Quentin State Prison

Lives in: San Quentin, Calif.

***Sr. Camille:* Jesuits are admired for their intelligence, learning and leadership qualities. Some readers might wonder if you're wasting your time, your life, ministering to men on San Quentin's death row.**

Williams: I've been asked that question many times by colleagues who are correction officers. Two groups have never asked me that: Jesuits and my friends who know me well. Jesuits know that St. Ignatius spent time ministering to prisoners and other outcasts, and he even mentioned prisoners in the founding documents of the Society of Jesus.

In the "Formula of the Institute," which defines what Jesuits are, Ignatius wrote: "Moreover, he should show himself ready to reconcile the estranged, compassionately assist and serve those who are in prisons or hospitals, and indeed, to perform any other works of charity, according to what will seem expedient for the glory of God and the common good."

Ignatius' vision of what it means to be a Jesuit included serving those in prisons. The educational institutions came later.

My closest friends have always seemed to grasp the value of a life of service to others. I remember that when I began to talk about entering the Society of Jesus while still a captain in the Air Force 30 years ago, my Air Force colleagues for the most part thought I had lost my mind. One Air Force friend who was Jewish got it, though. He said, "I get it, you are trying to answer a higher calling."

What attracted me most to the Society of Jesus were men who were not afraid to "waste their lives" for the ideals of our Christian faith. By the standards of "the world" -- our culture, our social standards -- religious life probably seems crazy to those who measure their value in money and power. But Jesuits are called to a different standard -- the banner of Christ. At its best, the Society of Jesus (indeed, the Christian church) is a countercultural voice in a world hell-bent on selfishness. So working with prisoners has always felt like a calling to me, a great gift. It has been the defining work of my life, and for 20 years it has brought me more joy than I ever could have imagined.

As far as wasting my time with the men on death row, whom some consider "undeserving monsters," I just don't see it that way. For one thing, even though some of them have done horrible things to others, they are still very much human beings. I think each one of them has dignity and value, and God loves each one of them. My job isn't to fix them or undo the damage they've done. I see my work as offering them a path for healing of their souls, to make peace with themselves and with God. I know many are sociopaths, but they are damaged human beings. They are not monsters.

Can you identify your critics?

Some are victims' rights people who think that caring for criminals equals not caring for victims. This is simply not true. I do care very much about the victims of the crimes of the men on death row. (These victims include their own loved ones who have to bear the burden of shame of having a son, brother, father or friend on death row.) I cannot serve both groups, but the care of the victims is something a lot of other people can do and can do better than I could. While I care for the men in prison, others need to be attending to the victims of crime and the families of the incarcerated.

What drew you to this ministry?

How often do we remember that Jesus Christ was arrested, thrown in jail, put on trial, convicted and sentenced to death? That he was given the death penalty and was executed by the state as a common criminal? So was John the Baptist. So were Peter, Paul, James and countless followers of Christ.

How did you get into prison ministry?

When I was a novice making a 30-day Ignatian retreat, the most powerful experience of prayer I had was when, unable to picture Jesus' face in my meditations, I asked him to show me his face. I distinctly remember his reply: "I will show you my face when you are ready to see me."

A few months later, it was time to choose a ministry "experiment." I read the description a novice had written about three years prior about his "experiment" working at one of Massachusetts' state prisons. It sounded utterly horrifying to me. So I saw that as a challenge and opted to try prison ministry. I spent three months at Massachusetts Correctional Institution in Norfolk under the supervision of St. Joseph Sr. Maureen Clark, who is now the Catholic chaplain at the Massachusetts prison for women in Framingham.

The very first day I was there, she took me to visit the men in the "hole." I remember distinctly walking away from one man's cell after we had been conversing through a narrow slot in his door used to pass food through or to handcuff inmates prior to removing them from their cells. The slot was only about 36 inches from the floor, so I had to crouch or kneel to speak to him. As I walked away, it just hit me -- I had been looking at the face of this man in solitary confinement in prison, and it was through him (and thousands more prisoners to come) that Jesus was showing me his face.

Would you please share some personal connection with someone you've met along the way?

Here's a story about an early formative experience in prison ministry, written in April 1998:

Mikey was confirmed a year ago in at the House of Correction. I always have the guys write a letter to God at the beginning of the confirmation class. He wrote in his letter, "I find some answers during Mass on Sunday. But not all. God, maybe when I go through the gates of heaven, You will tell all. I would like to end this letter with I love you God no matter what happens to me."

After he was rearrested that fall and I saw him at the Nashua Street Jail in Boston, we talked several times about getting him into a halfway house. He had a bed waiting for him there two weeks before he died.

About six weeks before that, he sent me a card in which he wrote:

Brother George:

I can't thank you enough. I want to let you know you really helped me through some bad times. Brother George, you brang God back in my life and my family too. I really thank God for you. And your always in my prayers. I thank you for believing in me. Not many have. Today my little girls call me Dad and it feels great. Thank you!

Your friend, Mikey

I have felt both the crushing helplessness of the prison ministry and its moments of sheer exhilarating grace. I have felt the power of Christ's suffering and death, as well as his love and compassion incarnate in Mikey's story and in many others', and I am deeply consoled that I have been privileged to offer many prisoners the chance to own and express their love for God in their own words.

As Mikey's letter says, at the time, I was a Jesuit brother. I knew I wanted to be a Jesuit from the beginning, but I was not moved by the idea of being a priest. After working in the jail and prisons for about five years as Brother George, I began to hear different prisoners say to me something along the lines of, "Why don't you be our priest? You know us better than the priests you bring in here for Mass." After about the 100th time I heard this, it dawned on me that I would like to be a priest for them, not for myself, especially for the sacrament of reconciliation. Forgiveness is perhaps the one greatest thing prisoners yearn for. So I asked for permission to change grades in order to be able to minister to the prisoners as their priest. This is something I have never regretted.

When did you begin work in San Quentin?

In 2010, when I was asked if I'd be interested in the job of Catholic chaplain there. I was thrilled at the idea, having visited San Quentin a few times when a fellow Jesuit, Steven Barber, was its chaplain. It seemed both attractive and terrifying, especially the idea of death row. The thought of accompanying a man to his execution as chaplain is nightmarish. But several of the men have asked me to be there for them should they ever be executed. I hope I don't ever have to do this, but I would certainly do it in order to be present to the men.

How does our nation's incarceration rate stand in comparison to that of other countries?

The United States of America is now the prison capital of the world. We incarcerate a higher proportion of our population than any other country on Earth.

What really troubles me is what this says about our country and the culture we accept as normal today. What are we saying to the world when we talk about human rights and the dignity of man yet consign so many of our own

citizens to prison and, once there, treat them like animals?

What I see every day are men with faces and names and children and memories who suffer greatly from the pains of life in prison. I know several men in our most highly secured unit who have been in what is essentially solitary confinement for over 20 years. Just to put this in perspective, international standards consider more than two weeks in solitary to be akin to torture, if not outright torture. Two weeks. And I know men who have done more than 1,000 weeks.

How many currently call San Quentin's death row home?

About 750, and we keep adding more and more inmates to it.

Of that number, how many make up your congregation?

I see about 100 men on death row who come to Catholic services. But I don't limit my ministry to just Catholics -- I try to meet them where they are and help them no matter what their spiritual path is.

Please describe the setting of what passes for a chapel.

The chapel in San Quentin State Prison's death row is a windowless old shower room encased in a heavy metal cage. Inside it, there are six wooden benches bolted to the floor upon which the members of my congregation sit.

There's a harsh florescent light overhead, and as I raise the consecrated host, the light illuminates it. I look past the host to the men in the cage. They are quiet and focused.

Do you wear priestly vestments when you celebrate Eucharist with them?

I wear both priestly vestments and a black stab-proof vest inside my own cage, which is about twice the size of an old phone booth. As required by the department, I padlock myself inside.

Can you give us some sense of what it feels like to be there?

Death row is not very noisy. The impression one gets walking in is like you're in some sort of giant ship or warehouse. There are five tiers back-to-back in the building with 60 cells on each tier. The cells themselves are pretty small: 5 feet wide by about 10 feet long. They don't have windows because all the cells are in the middle of the building, and they are covered at the entrance with heavy black iron mesh and bars. Almost all of the men on death row have a television and a radio, their main contact with the outside world.

I guess if there is one feeling to sum it all up, I'd say "claustrophobic." There's heaviness about the place -- physically, emotionally and spiritually. It's dark.

Have any been executed on your watch?

No, thank God, and I hope none will be. The last execution was conducted in 2006.

Have any been exonerated?

I know of two men who had their death sentences reduced to life in prison. I don't know of any who have been completely exonerated of their crime, but we certainly have been reading of cases around the country where more advanced forensic science has proven some prisoners condemned to death innocent.

Some of the men on the row may have committed a single lethal crime; others may have proven themselves serious threats to society. If you could design a system to deal with those convicted of murder, what would it be like?

There are a lot of men at San Quentin who have murdered others. Most of them are probably not serious threats to society, the crimes having been committed while drunk or high or just young and stupid. Some of the most evolved people I've met in my life have been convicted murderers. Although we have a handful of serial killers on death row, most of the men don't fall into that category.

I think no matter what the crime, the punishment of removing a person from society and taking away their freedom is the punishment. Once a person is incarcerated, even if it is for the rest of his or her life, why does his or her life have to be one of unremitting dehumanization? The "country club" propaganda of the right wing is utterly wrong. The argument of "Why should a convicted killer get to watch TV, play sports, get education," you name it, is wrongheaded and based on vengefulness, not justice. Victims and their families need to be given support and opportunities for healing. They don't need to be used to inflame hostility toward prisoners.

Can you share an example of this?

I remember when I worked in Boston, a young man was murdered in a housing project in Charlestown. I knew the killer. The crime was brutal and senseless. But the media and some political interests used the mother of the victim to prevent any improvements in the ways prisoners in Massachusetts were treated. "Why should he get to have Christmas with his kids when my son will never get to have Christmas?" The pain of this woman is clear and poignant. But this pain was then used to enforce a steadily increasing level of dehumanizing treatment by the Massachusetts Department of Correction. By the logic of the victim's mother, we should not give prisoners food or clothing either because their dead victims don't get food or clothing. Instead of just one tragic loss of life, we allow revenge to ruin many lives. The young children of the man who committed the murder were also denied Christmas with their father.

In a time before your life's work began, where and with whom did you grow up?

I was born in Connecticut -- Welsh/Irish/German/Italian/Yankee ancestry. I come from a long line of Protestant blue-bloods. My paternal ancestors arrived in New England in the 1630s. I'm descended from Roger Williams, Anne Hutchinson and Mary Dyer, which prompted my friend, Jesuit Fr. Jim Martin, to observe a long time ago, "You're descended from heretics and witches -- no wonder you became a Jesuit!"

I grew up Catholic but never went to Catholic schools. I had no idea what Jesuits were until I met some in Alaska, where I was stationed as an Air Force officer after college. They impressed me most with their open minds and great senses of humor. I knew I wanted to be like them.

What in your development do you believe equips you for your role?

That is a good question. I think having gone through a period of depression in my 30s helped me know what suffering is. There are all kinds of prisons that people can wind up in, and depression is certainly one awful place to be.

My parents always modeled for me the value of service to others. My father was a firefighter and my mother always expressed compassion for people who were mistreated, so working with prisoners seems to be a way of serving those who society as a whole rejects.

Do any chide you for working in a prison system many consider unjust?

No. I don't get this from anyone who knows me. I think they realize that in order to be able to minister to men and women in prison, one has to be able to work with the system to some extent without becoming co-opted by it. Some people can help change the system through advocacy and even protests, but I feel my calling is to be there in the trenches with the prisoners.

Where do you find support?

From my friends, from the Jesuits I know and live with, and from the prisoners I serve.

How do you relax?

I'm a Jesuit workaholic. What does "relax" mean? Actually, I like to get out to hike in the beautiful places around the Bay Area. I like movies, reading and dinners with friends. I miss having pets or a garden -- where I live doesn't afford the possibility of either -- but I enjoy caring for plants, and once I move to a bigger room, I intend to have a nice aquarium.

How and with whom do you pray?

I pray every day. As Jesuits, our contemplative life is essential. Without daily prayer and meditation, I don't think my work could be sustained. I spend most of my liturgical life in the prison setting, but I enjoy getting out from time to time to see what's going on in the local church in parishes. I also like to visit and see what our evangelical brothers and sisters are doing. This began with my experience of working at an evangelical-sponsored halfway house in Massachusetts. I've imported a lot of their praise music into our San Quentin liturgies.

Does a particular Scripture passage move you?

Hebrews 13:3: "Be mindful of prisoners as if sharing their imprisonment and of the ill-treated as of yourselves."

Thank you, George, for being so utterly mindful of them.

[Mercy Sr. Camille D'Arienzo, broadcaster and author, narrates *Stories of Forgiveness*, a book about people whose experiences have caused them to consider the possibilities of extending or accepting forgiveness. The audiobook, renamed *Forgiveness: Stories of Redemption*, [is available](#) [1] from Now You Know Media.]

Editor's note: We can send you an email alert every time Sr. Camille's column, Conversations with Sr. Camille, is posted. Go to this page and follow directions: [Email alert signup](#) [2].

Source URL (retrieved on 07/23/2017 - 00:06): <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/conversations-sr-camille/jesuit-death-row-chaplain-we-allow-revenge-ruin-many-lives>

Links:

[1] <http://www.nowyouknowmedia.com/stories-of-forgiveness.html>

[2] <http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup>