



The World Community for Christian Meditation

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The interfaith chapel in this northern prison is a quarter of a mile walk from the first of the series of locked gates. With each one clanging behind us, we walk down bare corridors with inmates' art displayed bleakly on the walls. At each stage you feel more cut off from the outside and more controlled by the world coming into view on the inside.

'Total institution' is an apt term. It was first coined in the social sciences last century to describe places where people's needs are met impersonally through a bureaucratic system and where full information is denied them in order to enforce stricter control. Home - and all the needs that it addresses - is cut off. What comes to mind, apart from prisons, are certain kinds of hospitals, schools, even religious houses of the past, cults and, interestingly, cruise ships or holiday camps. Overall the sociologists speak of such institutions as constituting a 'mortification of self'.

This was a popular term in mystical theology for a while although St Benedict never uses it preferring obedience and the surrender of self-will. Mortification has a deadly ring, closer to what Simone Weil meant by affliction - a state in which one not only suffers physically but one's very identity is degraded. There are very good and enlightened people working in the prison service who, one feels, have a calling to help the inmates survive their ordeal; but how anyone could think of these generally as places of rehabilitation is mystifying.

Yet you never know.

The Spirit lives in every human heart and so can be smuggled into prisons more easily than drugs. A small group of prisoners, a deacon and a prison officer standing at the back to keep an overview and protect the visitors should need arise, all gather in the chapel, their different worlds temporarily merging. A brave attempt has been made to furnish and decorate the space as a sacred area. The prison can't get mass on Sundays so although it's Friday we will say the Sunday mass and listen to the gospel story of Jesus meeting with the doubly outcast and marginalised Samaritan woman. The story and the theme of thirst in all the readings fit the moment.

Emotionally and religiously it is has a normal appearance but it feels like coming to a disaster zone where the obvious damage has been cleared away but the people are still in trauma. The pain is hidden but palpable and perhaps this is why the prisoners seem to carry the dignity of those who have had their dignity taken from them.

The mass and meditation both speak to this place of human poverty. We speak about

meditation and they learn about their fellow prisoners in jails around the world who have been able to turn this inhumane environment into a pattern of spiritual growth. Meditating in a total institution is difficult for many reasons but it's possible. They seem to listen, some more intently than others and I notice that the prison guard who is sitting now on his own in the back row is also paying attention.

Everyone shares in communion, including the officer who is a Catholic like most of the inmates of the prison. Then we meditate in silence for fifteen minutes. There is a deep stillness in the group and the sacramental presence seems to have opened up ? just as it is meant to ? into an interior communion. We are, for these moments at least, a community. The Council document on the liturgy said that the purpose of the liturgy is to cultivate a ?contemplative orientation among the people of God?. Here perhaps better than in some parishes it seems to have worked.

After meditation I open my eyes and sound the bell three times. As usual, everyone continues with their eyes closed for some moments including, I notice, the prison guard who has been meditating with us. His silence shows what unity we had just been blessed with and by. The peace that unity ? and only unity ? can bring had entered even this institution where everything is double-checked and screened and nothing is fully trusted.

The day before I had meditated with a class of thirteen year-olds where the teachers and deputy principal were also present. All institutions run on some form of hierarchy and their distinctive roles inevitably create power patterns. As the Arab Spring is testifying uninterrupted power corrupts the institution as a whole and erupts in violence. One day perhaps enlightened statesmen may find a way to try targeted oases of silence during times of conflict as well as airstrikes and trade embargoes.

The prison guard resumed his role ? actually he had never betrayed it, just contextualized it more humanly. He happily gave us a few extra minutes to say goodbye.



Laurence Freeman OSB

The World Community for Christian Meditation, of which Laurence Freeman OSB is director, has recently opened a new outreach program ? ?Meditatio? (www.wccmmeditatio.org)

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