



FALL 2023

NEWSLETTER

Since our last Newsletter Update in the Spring of 2023, our schedule of retreat visits has included the following:

- May 15th-16th** *California Correctional Institution in Tehachapi, CA*
- May 21st** *Parents Retreat*
- May 22nd-23rd** *Calipatria State Prison in Calipatria, CA*
- June 4th-5th** *California State Prison (LAC) in Lancaster, CA*
- June 19th-20th.** *California Correctional Institution in Tehachapi, CA*
- June 26th-27th** *Calipatria State Prison in Calipatria, CA*
- July 17th-18th** *California Correctional Institution in Tehachapi, CA*
- July 22nd-23rd** *California State Prison (LAC) in Lancaster, CA*
- Aug 28th-30th** *JRJI Planning Retreat*
- Sept 10th-11th** *California State Prison (LAC) in Lancaster, CA*
- Sept 18th-19th** *California Correctional Institution in Tehachapi, CA*
- Sept 25th-26th** *Calipatria State Prison in Calipatria, CA*
- Oct 1st-2nd** *California State Prison (LAC) in Lancaster, CA*

RETREATS

The following is a reflection written by Fr. Michael Kennedy, SJ, after a retreat at the California State Prison-Los Angeles County in Lancaster, CA.

REAL BEAUTY - LANCASTER STATE PRISON

Sunsets. Camera out trying to take the perfect picture. Lancaster Monday morning sunrise. It was a desert sunrise. The orange and red colored the whole sky. It was only 100 degrees, so it seemed cool. The day before it had rained in the morning. We had a retreat on two different yards yesterday. We ended in the afternoon, and the clouds began to blow across the sky.

We arrived in the marina at sunset time. On the right, the rain was still lingering in the sky. And in front of the marina the red blood colors began to brighten the sky. There are many beautiful sunsets here at the marina. Very different terrain than the desert.

The rainbow last night got brighter and brighter. The sky over the water grew more and more intensely filled with blood. It literally took your breath away with this five-minute entry into pure raw beauty. Water, a full rainbow, clouds filled with vibrant orange-red colors. After being in cement rooms all day, maybe this is what was so hypnotizing, a once-in-a-lifetime scene. No Hollywood producer could replicate this. Never. So, José Luis says to me, “This is so beautiful,” and without missing a beat I said, “Yes, it is so beautiful, but what we experienced today was more beautiful.”

We came back to the Jesuit community and José Luis, Nick, Collin, and myself continued to bask in the beauty now of a subtle array of darkened clouds mixing in with the red clouds. It was better than any scene of the sunsets I have ever seen.

Before going to sleep on this Monday, I reflected back on the comment, “This is nothing compared to what we experienced today inside a prison.” I know this sounds crazy and it is crazy. It is not only paradoxical, but it was the kind of craziness that the Greeks spoke about when Paul preached the message of Jesus to them.

I just looked at the picture I took of the sunset. Again, I am amazed of how beauty sings to the soul on such a deep level.

I guess that is what sat in my heart as I saw this sunset. Is it a challenge to be with those at the bottom? Of course it is. That is what Dorothy Day is so clear about. She called us to be true to this kind of love with those at the bottom. Not just talking about it, but actually being there. It is hard to speak about what happens within the heart when you listen to, and are with, those who share from the heart of blood-colored-cloud experiences. It humbles you. You are not the center of the universe. We are just a small part of the big picture.

Reflecting on this, I think the strongest experience was just being with those who have done Bible-like acts of sitting through a retreat in a hundred-degree weather. This humbles me. I know there are not a lot of options for them, and yet there are. All this helps me believe so much deeper in the power of blood-colored rainbow sunsets. Unless we have rich experiences like these, then we will simply write another book, give another conference, and be busy about what it means to forgive and be healed.

We were blessed to use the warden's cart, because it is a good mile to walk between yards in this temperature. When he told me we could use it, I thought inside to myself that meeting important people certainly helps us do our work. St. Ignatius was clear about how we need to have sunsets that are beautiful and days of desert blistering heat. Both levels of the socioeconomic system.

But reflecting on this retreat, I am grateful to the one who could watercolor so beautifully the sky before us yesterday. But certainly, yesterday the real beauty was found inside the spaces where everyone has said there is only darkness. That is the paradox. Not just that you can find light where we think there is only darkness, but it is stronger in the sense that we experienced deep beauty where we are told there is no beauty. By the standards of the culture, this is impossible, but beauty is experienced from the spirit of those who are vulnerable and open and who truly reach deep within to find God's mercy.

That is what religious life is about. It is excellent all the vocation promotion that we embark upon. But when the heart has seen into the very veins of God's merciful love, something happens. We don't need to give another paper about it. Or write another article about it. These are good things. But it is different from what it is like to have mercy and beauty explode inside to the sky outside when you have experienced this.

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So actually, I am not too sure what happened yesterday at the retreat. Only that seeing this beauty at the end of the day woke something inside of me to understand more clearly what we are doing. Nothing great, nothing special. Hidden. Deep.

So, what happens in life if you never experience burning sunsets inside? The superficial reigns, and the superficial drugs the soul. Who are the important, and who are those at the bottom? Jesus was so clear about this. So clear.

All during the day, there were all sorts of men sharing how they were going to be moved to some place new. Now more than ever, that is what is happening so much with CDCR: changes within the prison population. Someone was going to move to Donovan, so they went around the circle, some sharing Cheetos and others some little sticks of candy.

Dorothy Day used to describe love as "a harsh and dreadful thing," and that was her take on the kind of love you feel with those in the food lines. That is the reality. That is where you put your body, and that is part of the coloring of the rainbow. If a rainbow was just one color it would not be so beautiful, and just like for us, if we limit our reality to one socioeconomic group, we are poorer for it: just one color in a rainbow.

New JRJI Team Member

Collin Price, SJ, a Jesuit scholastic, joined our team in September. He has been getting to know the participants on the retreats and supports them in their journey of healing and transformation. He has shared a reflection on his experience at JRJI.

JRJI has taught me, in my short time here, about finding God in hidden places. Prisons, and the people locked inside them, are hidden away from the rest of society. Most of the places we visit are a half-day's drive away, but when we take the time to travel that distance, we arrive at a place where God resides. Matthew 25 tells us to put ourselves in contact with poor, suffering, outcast people because God is present in the relationships we build with people who are suffering, especially those whose pain is hidden away. We are not the Christ-bearers, bringing God's message to sinners in need of saving. We are all loved sinners in need of God's healing mercy, and we find it when we encounter the light of Christ in another person, whether they are wearing black or wearing blue. Our gift is to look underneath the bushel baskets of concrete and barbed wire, face tattoos and life sentences, to find the light within the people we encounter and make it a little less hidden.

Upcoming Retreats

UPCOMING JRJI RETREATS WILL INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

Oct 23rd-24th *Calipatria State Prison in Calipatria, CA*

Oct 25th-27th *Centinela State Prison in Imperial, CA*

Nov 4th-6th *California State Prison (LAC) in Lancaster, CA*

Nov 13th-14th *California Correctional Institution in Tehachapi, CA*

Nov 20th-21st *Calipatria State Prison in Calipatria, CA*

Dec 3rd-4th *California State Prison (LAC) in Lancaster, CA*

Dec 11th-12th *California Correctional Institution in Tehachapi, CA*

Dec 18th-19th *Calipatria State Prison in Calipatria, CA*

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