



### By Brian Cahill

Lorenzo has been attending the same parish church since 1994. For some time he and others had been trying to get a parish council established. Finally, in November 2003, with the arrival of a new pastor Jesuit Father Stephen Barber, who came with a commitment to establish a parish council, Lorenzo and other parishioners became the charter members of the parish council of Our Lady of the Rosary.

Our Lady of the Rosary is the Catholic Chapel at San Quentin Prison. Fr. Stephen Barber is the Catholic Chaplain. Lorenzo is a 37 year old inmate doing 15 years to life for a second degree murder he committed in 1986.

Lorenzo was one of three brothers raised by a career Air Force mechanic and his wife. He grew up in the north Bay Area, where his Dad worked for one of the oil refineries after he retired from the military. Lorenzo was raised in a Catholic environment. By the time he was in high school, he was a leader in the parish youth group, playing football and working as a lifeguard. By this time there was also a great deal of tension and conflict with his father. Lorenzo began to drink to deal with his emotional pain. He graduated in June of 1986 and was excited about being the first one of his family to go on to college. He also was in love with a 15 year old sophomore.

In September, Lorenzo's world fell apart. Four days before he was to start college, His father told him he would not pay for any of his college expenses. At the same time, he discovered that his girlfriend wanted to end the relationship. Lorenzo was hurt, angry and depressed enough to consider suicide. He got his father's 38 caliber revolver and intended to go to a remote area and kill himself. He went to his parish church to talk to the youth ministry coordinator, but she was not there. He then decided to go to the high school and see his girlfriend. He took two bullets out of the revolver so that the hammer would fall on an empty chamber if the trigger was pulled. He confronted his girl friend as she came out of class and they argued. She tried to walk away and he pushed her against the wall. He pulled out the gun, pointed it at her and pulled the trigger. The hammer hit a live round. By the time Lorenzo was taken to the police station, the girl had died.

Lorenzo thought God had abandoned him, but during his 20 months in county jail, he was visited and counseled by four priests who brought God back into his life. He began to study Scripture and pray, and by the time Lorenzo was sent to Old Folsom Prison, and later to the state prison in Vacaville, he was an altar server and lector at Mass.

Lorenzo acknowledges the devastation he caused. He took the life of a 15 year old girl, an only child. He caused immeasurable pain to her parents, family and friends, violated their trust and support, and in every way permanently shattered their lives. In a different but painful and lasting way, his own parents and family members were devastated, as were the students and staff at his high school. His mother was made to feel like an outcast at church. No one feels more remorse and sorrow for what he has done than Lorenzo. And no one has done more to change his life, to live his life in a way that would honor the young woman he killed, to live his life in a way that would honor God.

Since 1994, when he was transferred to San Quentin, Lorenzo has also served as sacristan, altar server, lector and Eucharistic Minister at Holy Rosary Chapel. In

2001 he successfully persuaded the Archdiocesan School of Pastoral Leadership (subsequently renamed the Catholic Studies Institute) to bring their curriculum to San Quentin. Lorenzo and 11 other inmates participated in classes over a 30 month period, renewing their faith, learning more about the teachings of the Church, developing their prayer life, and in the process, becoming a small faith community.

Lorenzo's story is not unique. Steve is 45 years old and doing 15 years to life for a second degree murder he committed when he was 20 years old. He was raised by a single mom and ran away when he was 13. He got involved in drugs and alcohol, bounced from one family member to another, did a stint in a program for juveniles at Synanon, and eventually went back to the world of drugs, both using and dealing. He tried to help a young woman get away from an abusive boy friend, and in the process a struggle took place, and Steve stabbed the man to death. He spent his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday in county jail awaiting his trial.

Steve rediscovered his faith 14 years ago, took the SPL classes, serves as lector and Eucharistic minister and is one of the original Parish Council members. He knows that while his victim's family has not forgiven him, God has forgiven him, and He wants Steve to forgive himself. He is a man of faith, a man of prayer and if he got the chance outside, I believe he would be a man of service, helping vulnerable families who need support and isolated kids who need role models.

Dwayne grew up in southern California, the youngest of seven children of a loving, spiritual mother and an abusive, alcoholic father. He was a three sport athlete in high school and played junior college football before he joined the Navy. He returned to school after his military service, but got caught up in the "fast" life, nightclubs, casual sex and drugs. His continued use of drugs led him to participate in a robbery in which he shot and killed a man. He was sentenced to 25 years to life for first degree murder. During the trial, Dwayne wrote a letter of deep remorse and apology to the wife of his victim and she forgave him. In fact she sat with Dwayne's mother and wife during the court proceedings.

After Dwayne arrived at San Quentin, he started going to Mass. He was welcomed by the chaplain at that time, Fr. Jack O'Neill, who guided him back to his faith and a life of prayer. He is a member of the Parish Council, an altar server, Eucharistic minister, co-director of the choir and also the drummer for the choir. Since 1986 he has been working with youth to attempt to divert them from the juvenile justice system, work that he would like to continue on the outside.

Ron grew up in a working class San Francisco neighborhood and went to Catholic grammar and high schools. He spent two years in the Army and went to work for the phone company. He married and had four children. After a traumatic automobile accident, job injuries and two major surgeries, he found relief in alcohol. He was divorced in 1977 and entered an alcohol treatment program. He remarried a few years later to a woman with two sons. He eventually began drinking again and they later separated. After another stint in a treatment program, they reconciled, but it didn't last, and struggling with multiple health issues, his drinking worsened. After this, he was at his estranged wife's house, and exploding in anger, he shot his wife and two step sons, killing one of the young adults. In 1985 he was convicted of first degree murder and sentenced to 15 years to life plus 6 years for the weapons and assault offenses. His conviction was subsequently overturned by the state appellate court. After the District Attorney's office withdrew a proposal for manslaughter, Ron accepted a plea to second degree murder with the understanding that with good behavior, he would be out of prison by 2000.

Sitting in a county jail cell under suicide watch, Ron found God, or perhaps more accurately, God found Ron. Since his conviction, he has been in five different prisons, arriving at San Quentin in 2000. That journey has coincided with his journey of faith, a journey of sorrow and remorse, a journey of prayer and meditation, and after two unsuccessful parole hearings, a journey toward acceptance of God's will. He has been through the Kairos Retreat, a non denominational three and a half day retreat based on the Cursillo model. He has taken the School Of Pastoral Leadership classes and sits on the Parish Council. Like Lorenzo, Steve and Dwayne, he lives every day with what he did and whom he hurt, but also like Lorenzo, Steve, Dwayne and so many others, he knows that God has forgiven him and therefore he has been able to forgive himself. As he wrote three years ago, "God has accomplished in me what I was unable to do, He restored me to life".

Ray grew up in the south Bay Area the third oldest of four brothers and two sisters. His parents were loving and caring Catholics, and Ray learned the value of hard work from his father who remodeled homes. He started drinking and smoking marijuana in high school. He barely graduated and went to work, but his life was spinning out of control. His parents were extremely concerned and thought that joining the Navy would help Ray straighten up. He lasted only two months and returned to a routine of work, partying, drugs and alcohol.

In one evening, Ray's life and the lives of many others were radically changed. Ray's 13 year old brother was going to an A's game with their 20 year old neighbor. Ray's Dad asked Ray to go because he didn't trust the neighbor. On their way to the game they stopped and picked up a case of beer. After the game they picked up two young men, and as they were driving, the twenty year old suggested that they rob the two young men. The young men became apprehensive and asked to be let out of the car. Ray exited the freeway, drove to a side road and stopped the car. The young men got out of the rear seat on the passenger side and the 20 year old got out and began to assault them. Ray went around the back of the car and joined in the fight. Ray and his neighbor got back in the car and along with his thirteen year old brother, left the scene. Back in the car, the twenty year old stated that he had stabbed both men. Ray kept driving, leaving both men on the side of the road. One of them died from his wounds.

During his time in county jail, Ray was visited by his parish priest and by his family. Ray was convicted of second degree murder and was sentenced to 22 years to life. During his early years in prison, Ray worked, played sports and smoked dope. He became a skilled cabinetmaker, generally stayed out of trouble and served his time. In 1995 his interior life finally started to change. He began to attend A.A. meetings and for the first time, to abstain from marijuana. After he was denied parole, he was transferred to San Quentin. In October he attended his first Kairos retreat, and his spiritual journey really began. That weekend he finally realized that God, through His Son, Jesus Christ, could forgive him, and therefore he could forgive himself. He could forgive himself as he put it, "for being a murderer and a coward". He could finally experience true, deep, spiritual remorse for what he had done. He could apologize for the life that was taken, for the lives that were destroyed, for the nightmare that he forced his younger brother to experience, for all the pain and devastation that he had caused. He could begin to follow Jesus Christ, and in doing so, he could begin to serve others. He became involved in two mentoring programs designed to divert young men from the justice system. He also facilitates a program for inmates focusing on accountability and integrity, and dealing with life issues without relying on substance abuse.

#### RESPONSIBILITY AND REHABILITATION

In the Spring of 2005, we completed our strategic planning process at Catholic Charities CYO. Among other things, we determined to be far more aggressive in doing parish outreach and responding to parish needs. Shortly after that, the first request for help we received was from the Parish Council at Our Lady of the Rosary Chapel at San Quentin. I was asked to join a group of folks involved in prison ministry to assist Lorenzo and the other Council members in developing a policy statement for the California Catholic Bishops. The statement was presented to Bishop Wester and Bishop Garcia who came to San Quentin in September. With some help from the group, the guys did a great job writing recommendations relating to victims assistance, prevention and alternatives to incarceration, services to inmate families, prisoner education, re-entry services and term to lifers who are denied opportunities for release. Term to lifers are inmates who were given a sentence ranging from a minimum number of years (e.g. 7years) to life, with the possibility of parole, and with an understanding that those who serve their time without problems would be eligible for parole as soon as their minimum number of years are served.

I have only come to know these men since June. The names I'm using here are not real, but their stories are real. There are many folks far more versed in prison ministry than I am, Fr. Steve Barber, Fr. Jack O'Neill, Lorraine Moriarty, John Kelly, Ray McKeon, Sister Marguerite Buchanan, Deacon Bernie O'Halloran, and so many others. But I do know that because an inmate attends Mass at the Chapel, does not mean he is ready to get out. I do know that not everyone who might be eligible for parole is in fact suitable for parole.

My oldest son is a police officer. He puts himself at risk every night he goes to work. He knows as I know, that there are people on the street who should be in prison. He

knows as I know, that there are people in prison who should not be let out. Some would say that taking a life should mean life in prison, period. It is an understandable point of view. But are there not exceptions? Are there not extenuating circumstances? Are there not times when we can say prison has served its purpose? Are there not times when we can say rehabilitation has been accomplished?

Lorenzo, Steve, Dwayne, Ron, Ray and many others with whom I've spent time on Thursday nights and Sunday mornings at San Quentin, are men of deep spirituality, full of remorse for the crimes they committed and the great harm they brought to others. They are qualified and capable of earning their way and serving others on the outside. Lorenzo knows diesel mechanics, welding, computer programming and is a trained machinist with a number of job offers waiting for him on the outside. He hopes to earn an undergraduate degree in mechanical engineering. Steve has an A.A. degree in engineering and eventually wants to get a Bachelors degree. Dwayne wants to continue the work he has been doing for the last twenty years, mentoring young adults and trying to keep them out of the justice system. Ron is 66 and has a vested pension, but would prefer reemployment with the phone company or some other work that would suit his skills. Ray has an A.A. degree and is an accomplished cabinetmaker with a job waiting for him at his brother's door and window shop; he also wants to volunteer as a youth counselor. All of them want to actively participate in parish life. All of them are rehabilitated by any objective standard.

Should they have been held accountable? Yes. Should they have been punished? Yes. Should they be held far beyond the term of their adjudicated sentence even though they have met all the criteria for release? No. They were not sentenced to life without the possibility of parole. They were sentenced with the possibility of parole. They have done their time and then some. They are not the same men they were when they did their crime. We need to see them and know them for who they are now, not who they were 20 or 25 years ago. We need to see them as living witnesses to the transformative power of faith. If we are followers of Jesus Christ, then we believe in the power of redemption and forgiveness, and if we believe, then we need to live that belief.

In November of 2004, Ray went for his seventh parole hearing. He assumed he would be denied, but this time, to his amazement and joy, he was found suitable. He gave thanks to God. Five months later, the Governor reversed the suitability finding. Ray remains in San Quentin, not losing hope and not losing faith. This April Ray was found suitable again and his fate is once again in the hands of the Governor. Dwayne has a parole hearing in September.

After being denied four previous times, the Board of Parole Hearings found Lorenzo suitable for parole in November of last year. The Board received over 75 separate letters of support for Lorenzo. Subsequently, the parents of Lorenzo's victim claimed that they did not receive notice of the November parole hearing. As a result the full Board held another hearing on Lorenzo on February 22, and disapproved the November decision. He was given another suitability hearing on June 28. There was a split decision and his case is again being referred to the Board of Parole Hearings for a hearing in the next month or two.

On the last Sunday before Christmas, I went to Mass at San Quentin and received Communion from Lorenzo. My prayer is that sometime in the not too distant future, I will go to Mass at Lorenzo's new parish, receive Communion from him, and if he has time, maybe take him out to breakfast. And God willing, in the near future, I will go to Mass at Steve's parish, and Dwayne's parish, and Ron's parish, and Ray's parish, and if they have time, take each one of them out to breakfast.

These are men who have caused a lot of pain and have experienced a lot of pain. These are men who because they are so intimately familiar with pain and isolation and suffering, are close to God. Maybe some of that closeness will rub off on those of us who pay attention to them.

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