



# Dennis McCain and Ray Leonardini

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## Unedited Transcript

**Dennis McCain:** Hi, welcome! My name is Dennis McCain. I was in the 2015 cohort. I'm here at the Universal Christ Conference, with my friend Ray Leonardini, founder of Prisoner Contemplative Fellowship. We had an article in the Living School Alumni newsletter a couple of issues ago discussing taking the contemplative prayer or centering prayer into penitentiaries. So I'd like to continue that conversation this morning with Ray. Ray, would you say that prisoners accept centering prayer?

**Ray Leonardini:** One of the remarkable things about doing work with prisoners, is how quickly they open to the notion of contemplative prayer. It's as if their background is ready-made for accepting the challenges of contemplative prayer, and I think it has a lot to do with suffering. Centering prayer, because it's a wordless prayer, concentrating on just being in the presence of God, and allowing anything to come up and let go of anything that comes up, is a ready-made type of prayer to help somebody understand how God is working in their life. So, contrary to what my opinion was going in, that is was gonna really be hard to convince prisoners of the value of centering prayer. On the contrary, they're ready for it. Just the silence itself is something that is so appealing to prisoners, because they get so little of it. So, it's a remarkable prayer practice.

**Dennis McCain:** So Ray, if you were to speak directly to anyone that may be interested in considering taking centering prayer into a penitentiary, what would be appealing to that or what would you say?

**Ray Leonardini:** Well, I think the first thing would be to appeal to their honesty, that for most people they're afraid to do it. I think the fear comes in two respects. First of all, some people just are afraid of going into a prison with people they believe to be dangerous people. That part is usually taken care of pretty easily, because there's protection and all that kind of stuff, and you see that they're not dangerous at all. But the second more subtle part of the fear is that prisoners are smart, and they're gonna see right through our own weaknesses and vulnerabilities, and we're gonna be exposed around tough guys that are somehow or another are gonna be disrespectful to us. I can tell you unequivocally, in the 10 or 11 years I've been doing it, that I've never had that experience. I never had any prisoner be disrespectful to me, either privately or in a group. So you're just gonna have to trust that reality, is that they want you in there so badly that they will do anything to encourage you to come in.

And then it's a question of crossing over. You go in with another volunteer and you experience the depths of their experience and you get committed to being with that; and pretty soon you realize that you're getting a lot more out of it than you're giving, and there's something in it that is much greater than you first thought it was. I encourage you to give it a try.

**Dennis McCain:** So Ray, I heard relationship, much like centering prayer is taught, where in the beginning it's acquaintance, develops into a friendship, and eventually intimacy with God. Would you say that you found the same with the prisoners that you encountered?

**Ray Leonardini:** The prisoners are completely taken by the notion of intimacy with God, because no religion teaches intimacy with God or how to achieve intimacy with God. So that's a captivating notion for them; this whole question of having an intimate, unmediated relationship with God. So the whole notion of doing healing work becomes possible, because the groundwork of intimacy has been established. It's a remarkable package. I just can't say enough about it, obviously. It's just a remarkable opportunity for growth, for everybody concerned.

**Dennis McCain:** Would you say that your own personal belief system was challenged?

**Ray Leonardini:** Some of my stereotype thinking was challenged. Yeah, I'd say so. I keep going back to a point I made earlier. I completely unanticipated the power of this prayer practice. I have to reiterate it. It's just so much more powerful than I thought it was. I thought it was one among many prayer practices, but I'd have to say at this point, for prisoners, particularly those who have been disenfranchised and alienated and hurt, particularly from their younger years, the notion of giving them a method of achieving direct intimacy with God is a total winner.

**Dennis McCain:** Now, you talked about their personalities, their receptivity to the prayer; Father Rohr talks much about the view from the bottom and the marginalized, can you think of a time when the offenders taught you something that came as quite insightful?

**Ray Leonardini:** It reminds me of that scene in Scripture, where Jesus encounters the Canaanite woman who wants him to heal her daughter, and He says, "I've only come for the Jews." And she convinces him that he really has come for everybody, and that's the way I feel about doing centering prayer with the prisoners. There is something special, there is no question about it, when you deal with the marginalized. They have something to teach us. Maybe it's about the love of God and how deep and vast the love of God is. I don't know, but they definitely have a very important message that we in the middle class don't generally get, unless we are shoulder to shoulder with the marginalized.

**Dennis McCain:** Well, thank you Ray, for your willingness to talk to us today--

**Ray Leonardini:** Great.

**Dennis McCain:** And to find out a little bit more about centering prayer with prisoners.

**Ray Leonardini:** Thanks.