

# Usefulness of Imago Dei Theology in Prison Ministry

By Donald Stoesz

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to help Catholic chaplains use specific concepts in their Catechism to work with inmates. Chaplains can appeal to the fact that offenders have been *created in the image of God* so that they can reclaim the *state of original righteousness* in which they were born. An act of repentance along with *a beatific vision of divine intimacy* enable inmates to become honest and trustworthy, capable of showing and experiencing real love, and living with faith and hope that they can become whole. A distinction between *original sin*, which is inevitable, and *concupiscence*, which represents a temptation to sin, relieves inmates of their belief that their offence defines them. An *act of conversion* along with the *rite of baptism* erases original sin, while the *assurance of salvation* replaces offenders' guilt and shame with a *faith* and *confidence* that they can overcome jealousy, addictions, anger, acts of violence, and therefore become a new person.

## Introduction

The Roman Catholic Catechism refers to the fact that Adam and Eve were in a state of original righteousness before they fell from grace.<sup>1</sup> This reality of innocence, naiveté, trust, openness, honesty, and love before the stain of original sin became inevitable enables us to have hope that sanctification is possible after our experience of divine justification.

I have chosen the Roman Catholic Catechism to reflect on this dynamic because it takes seriously the difference between the inevitability of sinning and the temptation to sin, called concupiscence. It demonstrates how our passions, emotions, conscience, and virtuous nature are connected to our will to live and love and believe in God.

It also shows how the inevitability of sinning forces us to return again and again to confession and forgiveness in order to move on with our lives. The ethics of the Ten Commandments are placed with the framework of loving God and loving our neighbour.

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<sup>1</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Second edition. Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2019), 375.

I conclude the article by considering the possibility of having a beatific vision of the intimacy of God. The Roman Catholic Catechism refers to a beatific vision as a mystical experience in which God opens up divine “mystery to man’s immediate contemplation and gives him capacity for it.”<sup>2</sup>

Experience of divine intimacy enables us to belong to the infinite Being known as God (Acts 17: 28). We are enveloped within the arms of Jesus in order to offer that same kind of love and care to others. Human intimacy and sense of belonging proceed directly from God’s assurance that we belong as an integral part of infinite Being. I have used the beatific vision in a prison context to assure inmates that they are loved, that they belong, and that it is possible for them to love and believe again.

### Created in the Image of God

The Catholic Catechism asserts the fact that human beings have been created in the image of God.<sup>3</sup> It affirms the freedom of human beings in their search for God.<sup>4</sup> It acknowledges that human beings sometimes use their radical freedom to sin.<sup>5</sup> This sin results in the loss of grace.

The Catechism makes a distinction between a tendency to sin, called concupiscence, and sin itself.<sup>6</sup> All of us have an inclination to sin based on our selfish desires. We sin when we feed the flames of these proclivities to possess what we want. Placing one’s covetous impulses within an ethic of care and respect enables a person to become whole, spiritually, emotionally, and socially. The Catechism acknowledges the inevitability of sinning while placing that original sin within the salvific perspective of the gospel. God forgives our sin, saves us from ourselves, and empowers us to live redeemed lives.

### Concupiscence

The Catholic Catechism makes a distinction between original sin that Adam and Eve initiated, and concupiscence, which represents a “weakness of nature” and a

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<sup>2</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1026-1028. “This mystery of blessed communion with God and all who are in Christ is beyond all understanding and description. Scripture speaks of it in images: life, light, peace, wedding feast, wine of the kingdom, the Father’s house, the heavenly Jerusalem, paradise. . . . God cannot be seen as he is, unless he himself open up his mystery to man’s immediate contemplation and gives him the capacity for it. The Church calls this contemplation of God in his heavenly glory ‘the beatific vision.’” Cf. Wikipedia, *Beatific Vision*, [Beatific vision](#) - Wikipedia Retrieved 10 July 2023.

<sup>3</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 41, cf. 31-34. Please excuse the use throughout of the masculine pronoun in the Catechism.

<sup>4</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1730-1742.

<sup>5</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1861-1864.

<sup>6</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 977-980, 1424-1426, 2514-2515.

“tendency to sin.” God removed original sin through atonement of Christ’s sacrifice. Believers confess that God has set them free from sin. Concupiscence nevertheless remains in believers.<sup>7</sup> Concupiscence refers to “the tinder to sin.” It represents the kindling within human emotions that is easily incited and ignited with the slightest spark.<sup>8</sup>

The ninth and tenth biblical commandments provide a better understanding about what concupiscence is all about.<sup>9</sup> The Catholic Catechism considers covetousness to be “any intense form of human desire” or “sensitive appetite” that goes contrary to the operation of human reason.<sup>10</sup> The first part has to do with lust of the flesh and lust of the eyes for “one’s neighbour’s wife.” These desires can lead to (sexual) violence and injustice.

The second part has to do with “coveting one’s neighbour’s goods,” the tenth commandment. The insatiable desire to have more can lead to theft, robbery, and fraud.<sup>11</sup>

Many of the offences committed by inmates fall under the general category of covetousness. A boyfriend beats up his girlfriend because of his possessiveness. He is jealous and afraid that she will fall in love with someone else. A husband commits adultery with another person because he is dissatisfied with his marriage relationship. A man rapes a woman because he does not know how to satisfy his sexual desires in an appropriate way.

Young men join gangs and steal because they cannot imagine earning enough money in a legitimate way to afford a Mercedes Benz car. The consumer society in which we live promises us that happiness lies in the purchasing of goods, in drinking alcohol, in gambling, and in taking what one can get from someone else.

The Catholic Catechism does not consider covetousness as a sin in-and-of-itself. It “unsettles” human beings’ “moral faculties” and inclines human beings to sin “without being in itself an offence.”<sup>12</sup> This means that desiring goods and being

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<sup>7</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 977-980, 1424-1426.

<sup>8</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1264-1266.

<sup>9</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2514-2516. Exodus 20:17 reads as follows: “You shall not covet your neighbour’s house, you shall not covet your neighbour’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.” The Catholic Catechism divides these sayings into two commandments, while the Protestant church regards the statement against covetousness as one commandment. The Protestant church divides Exodus 20:4-6 into two commandments, “You shall have no other gods before me,” and “You shall not make for yourself a graven image.” The Catholic Catechism regards these two sentences as one command, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2051-2052.

<sup>10</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2515.

<sup>11</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2534-2536, 1865-1869.

<sup>12</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2515.

attracted sexually to others is a natural part of human nature. That is the way that God has made us.

A problem starts when we give these feelings free rein, thinking that anything is permissible. Our insecurities tell us that we deserve more than we have, that we deserve to “interfere in other people’s lives” in an inappropriate manner. We allow our own unsettledness and lack of satisfied interiority to control our actions.

The Catholic Catechism suggests that human beings can struggle against sin and emerge victorious. In speaking about the woundedness of human beings, the Catechism states:<sup>13</sup>

Baptism, by imparting the life of Christ’s grace, erases original sin and turns a man back to God, but the consequences of nature, weakened and inclined to evil, persist in man and summon him to spiritual battle.

In another section, it states:<sup>14</sup>

The new life in Christian initiation has not abolished the frailty and weakness of human nature, nor the inclination to sin that tradition calls concupiscence, which remains in the baptized such that with the help of the grace of Christ they may prove themselves in the struggle of Christian life. This is the struggle of conversion directed toward holiness and eternal life to which the Lord never ceases to call us.

This distinction between concupiscence as “a tendency to sin” and “sin itself” is important for two reasons. First, the inmates that I worked with had not only watched pornography or thought of killing their neighbour. They did not only covet their neighbour’s wife and goods. They seized and claimed both.

These actions demonstrate that human desires are powerful factors in people’s lives. Feelings, emotions, and “sensitive appetites” can easily overflow into rage, revenge, violence, and injustice.

There are, indeed, differences between thinking and acting, desiring and seizing, coveting and claiming. Most people have thought, desired, and coveted many things. They have not acted on these impulses. They have been able, with the help and grace of God, to refrain from overt criminal and immoral acts while still being susceptible to sin and evil.

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<sup>13</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 404-405.

<sup>14</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1426.

The second reason for making a distinction between a tendency to sin and sin itself is because some offenders find it hard to separate their sexual desires, negative feelings toward themselves and their spouses, desire for money, and hatred of their enemies -- from the criminal acts that they committed. They concluded -- based on their guilt and shame regarding their criminal acts -- that it was wrong to feel anger, express rage, or own their emotions to know what went wrong with their lives.

A person's range of feelings is normal and has been created by God. These emotions are immensely useful in understanding how other people and things make us feel. Strong desires are part of how God has created us. God has created a balance between the irrational and the rational, between heart and mind, between emotions and rationality.

To say that concupiscence is not "in-and-of-itself" a sin brings a huge sigh of relief. Separating the act from the "tinder to sin" that ignites the blaze enables us to access the many unconscious and conscious reasons that we commit sin. We have sometimes nurtured concupiscence to the point that it became an unstoppable raging fire. We all have weaknesses within ourselves: insecurity, avarice, pride, power, lust, envy, jealousy, anger, or rage. We have sometimes fed these desires to get what we want. Emotions are not necessarily sins in-and-of-themselves. They can lead to much bigger things if allowed to fester.

The Catholic Catechism's reticence to call concupiscence a direct sin allows us to own that part of ourselves that is less than good. Acknowledging weakness and sensitivity enables us to claim aspects of our lives that need work. Believers can struggle and claim victory rather than seeing faith primarily as a matter of "seeking forgiveness" for having these thoughts at all.<sup>15</sup>

### Passions

The Catechism continues its reflection on the emotional aspect of existence by looking at human passions. It affirms the fact that passions are "neither good nor evil. They are morally qualified only to the extent that they effectively engage reason and will."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The limits of Reinhold Niebuhr's theology have to do with the fact that he had a tragic view of life. He believed that the love of God entered into history primarily as crucifixion and forgiveness, D. B. Robertson, editor, *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1976), 269, 276. This negative view of salvation history makes it hard for inmates to affirm the possibility of change in their lives, cf. Donald Stoesz, *Glimpses of Grace*, 159.

<sup>16</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1767.

The Catechism builds on this distinction by suggesting that love, “attracted to the good,” represents the most fundamental passion.<sup>17</sup> Love causes a desire for the absent good and the hope of attaining it. This movement finds completion in the “pleasure and joy of the good” possessed.

Offenders are hemmed in on every side by accusations and convictions that they have broken many taboos. Daytime programming emphasizes the negative aspect of this fact. Offenders are given tools to stop “stinking thinking,” to consider the consequences of their actions, to learn what “not to do” in a situation.

Concentrating on taboos such as not stealing, not killing, not sexually assaulting, not harming, and not coveting is limited in effectiveness because of its deontological priority (emphasis on rules). This type of programming does not provide offenders with enough positive reinforcements, teleological goals, and reachable rewards to motivate them to change.<sup>18</sup> This lacuna is why the above statement about love and its rewards is so important. To speak about the “pleasure and joy of the good possessed” represents a completion of life that is hard to put into words.

To give an example, *eros* finds its fulfillment in the mutual love of marriage. At the same time, forgiveness, forbearance, acceptance, and compromise, called *agape*, represents an integral aspect of the covenantal nature of the relationship.

The same thing applies to one’s love for God. A beatific vision of God in which divine intimacy is experienced represents the wherewithal of faith. I can attest to this fact on an experiential level. When I transferred together with my family to another province four thousand kilometers away to continue my work as a chaplain, I had a powerful mystical experience. The move had been stressful; I had already worked for over ten years in the system. My family and I had a difficult time adjusting.

At the same time, I found myself refreshed in my work. My colleagues were immensely supportive. The work was fulfilling. I found a renewed sense of calling to chaplaincy. Part of this renewal involved an intense spiritual and religious experience. I found myself reflecting on an image of Madonna and child during the Advent and Christmas season. I developed a seven-step spiritual journey in

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<sup>17</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1765.

<sup>18</sup> I have considered the difference that deontology and teleology, myth and fairy tale, make in motivating and providing positive solutions to inmates’ problems, Donald Stoesz with Hank Dixon, *A Prison Chaplaincy Manual*, 12-14, 95-100.

conjunction with the use of a labyrinth. I wrote a manual for the spiritual retreats that I facilitated.<sup>19</sup>

I referred to this experience as the intimate presence of God. Human intimacy and love are two attributes that are hard to find in a prison setting. Divine intimacy represents one means by which one can find one's way back to the living. A beatific vision is one way of naming this experience.

Seeking good as an object is a way that passions become integrated into the life of faith. Possessiveness turned into ugly covetousness is reoriented to the goodness of Being of which I am a part. Desire and longing that want to control are turned outward to envelop others through selfless love. A sense of belonging is gained as a person lets go of self. A sense of self, in other words, is regained through God's and other people's affirmations.

Getting to the bottom of this dialectic between the need to be selfish and the ability to be selfless has represented the heart of my ministry. Inmates come to me because of their overriding guilt and shame about their crimes. They grasp at love instead of attaining it. They have controlled and harmed others because they thought that would in some perverse manner satisfy their needs.

I have validated their need to stand up for themselves and for their wants to be fulfilled. I have affirmed the God-given role of passions and desires in their lives. At the same time, I have suggested that attraction to the good, basic to their soul, represents the means by which love can be experienced and embraced.

The fact that the ship of blame and conviction is tilted so far in one direction within the prison system is the reason why I find the Catholic Catechism's affirmation of human nature, human freedom, passions, conscience, and the beatific vision so refreshing. In the midst of guilt and shame comes an affirmation that we have been created good. We retain the freedom to act in a gracious manner. God is "with us" as Being itself. Passions find ultimate fulfillment within believers oriented toward the good.

This good can be referred to as love. Intimacy works in human and divine relationships.<sup>20</sup> This intimacy is an existential reality along with a teleological goal

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<sup>19</sup> Donald Stoesz, *The Intimate Presence of God: A Seven Step Spiritual Journey* (Innisfail: Shtace Publishing, 2003), 81 pages. Cf. Donald Stoesz, *Glimpses of Grace*, 83-84.

<sup>20</sup> Biblically based courses such as *Experiencing God*, by Henry Blackaby (Nashville: Lifeway Press, 2008), and *Purpose Driven Life*, by Rick Warren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), start the discussion by affirming the fact that God is "seeking a loving relationship," *Donald Stoesz with Hank Dixon, A Prison Chaplaincy Manual*, 155-157.

by which offenders can be healed and redeemed. Motivational interviewing has everything to do with hope and faith that love will win out in the end. The actual experience of love on a divine and human level reinforces this sense of hope and wish for freedom. The idea that we experience “pleasure and joy” in the good achieved, that we “sing for joy” at this divine experience represents an immediately achieved goal that motivates us again and again to move toward the good.

### Moral Conscience

The Catechism goes on to speak about the role of conscience. Conviction of conscience has always been my most obvious starting point regarding interviews with offenders. Within the first five minutes, offenders are telling me how sorry they are that they committed their offences. They tell me that even though they knew it was wrong, they did it anyway. They are at a loss to know why they were willing to go against the dictates of their conscience. They became wilful and arrogant in the face of a great deal of stress, debilitating circumstances, and sheer inability to ask for help. They found their own criminal solutions to the problem.

Offenders’ recognition of the fact that what they were doing was wrong has always been the most obvious way “into” all the reasons and actions and justifications for what they did. The fact that they have a law written in their hearts -- to which Ezekiel (18:1-4), Jeremiah (31:31-34), and Romans (1:20-21, 2:14-15) attest -- showed me that inmates have been created good. They are capable of making moral judgments. They are deeply sorry for what they have done.

These confessions and acknowledgements are the first step in a long road to recovery. Offenders suspended the voice of their conscience in favour of wilful actions and harmful decisions. It takes time to unravel what that means and the role that conscience plays in all of this.

### Virtues

Mortal virtues are the last aspect of human emotions, human nature, and human will that the Catechism deals with before turning to the consequences of sin. Hope, faith, and love are regarded as three theological virtues that inform other ones: prudence, justice, fortitude, perseverance, and fruits of the Spirit.

Use of overriding theological virtues to guide specific principles and actions is what makes the Catechism “user friendly.” Faith, hope, and love are three aspects of spirituality and belief that inmates know very well. They are forced in prison to either hope or die. They are forced to come to terms with what they believe. And they have

to reflect on whether love, actualised as part of their past life, is again possible. Whether love of God or love of others or love of self is intended is less important than the very possibility of love within dire circumstances and tragic results.

The way in which these three theological virtues inform other ones is reflective of the Catechism's overall approach. It places the Ten Commandments within the context of the two greatest commandments: love of God and love of neighbour. Integration of the Old and New Testaments within a covenantal theology speaks volumes about how these Ten Commandments have already been written on the hearts of human beings.<sup>21</sup>

Jesus fulfilled the Law and Ten Commandments by helping people see how this applied specifically to them. The Ten Commandments represent a big fish net that captures the worst misdemeanours. Jesus is suggesting that the webbing in this fish net is indeed much smaller, so small in fact that it fits into our hearts.

The Catechism has a wonderful way of enunciating this truth:<sup>22</sup>

It is important for every person to be sufficiently present to himself in order to hear and follow the voice of his conscience. This requirement of *interiority* is all the more necessary as life often distracts us from any reflection, self-examination, or introspection.

The harmful consequences of offenders' actions make them numb and devoid of any feelings and emotions regarding their crime. They committed their crime by suspending, not only their conscience, but their empathy, humanity, morality, religiousity, spirituality, and solidarity with others as well. The sheer selfishness of their actions makes inmates particularly difficult to deal with in regard to their ability to be "present to themselves" in the form of *interiority*.

The challenge of this task is the reason that the Catechism places the Ten Commandments within the context of love of God and love of neighbour. The underlying purpose of the Ten Commandments' taboos is to undergird the positive. Sanctity of life is the reason not to kill. Belief in God is the reason not to have idols. Understanding internal authority is the reason one honours one's parents. Enjoyment

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<sup>21</sup> Jeremiah 31:33, Ezekiel 37:26-28. The Catechism outlines a covenantal theology starting with Noah and continuing through Abraham, Moses, Israel, and Jesus Christ, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 56-73; cf. Wikipedia, *Covenant Theology*, [Covenant theology - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Covenant_theology) Retrieved 29 December 2022.

<sup>22</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1779.

of private property is the reason one does not steal others' goods. Blessing and joy in other people's relationships represent the flip side of envy and covetousness.

I have welcomed this wholistic approach because inmates are drawn so quickly into the condemnation that is front and centre in regard to taboos they have broken. My goal has been to complement the importance of keeping taboos with the positive reasons that these laws have been established in the first place.

### Restoration to Original Righteousness

The Catholic Catechism affirms the fact that Adam and Eve were constituted in an original "state of holiness and justice."<sup>23</sup> This grace of original holiness was to "share in the divine life." Children represent a good example of what it means to dwell in this state of original righteousness. We remember the naiveté, childlike trust, kindness, compassion, love, care, hope, and faith that we had as pre-adolescents.

The Catechism affirms the fact that even though human beings were created good, they fell as a result of Adam and Eve's sin.<sup>24</sup> This inevitability of sinning is known as original sin. Eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil meant that Adam and Eve had to leave paradise. They sowed fig leaves as clothing for themselves because they had lost their innocence.

We can all remember the time when we lost our naiveté. Perhaps we threw sand into our brother's face because they took away our toy. Perhaps this loss of innocence had to do with guilt over sexual awareness. We can remember the time when we started disobeying our parents. Perhaps we stole a candy bar from the grocery store.

Inmates are very aware of the evil and sin that they have committed. They live with the consequences of the decisions they have made. This consciousness of sin makes them despair and become depressed. They believe that they are fundamentally evil and not worthy of love and attention.

I tell inmates to return to a second naivete<sup>25</sup> in order to find healing and hope. The innocence, love, and trust that one experienced as a child needs to be revisited and

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<sup>23</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 375. Cf. Wikipedia, *Original Righteousness*.

<sup>24</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 397.

<sup>25</sup> Paul Ricoeur elaborates on what this second naiveté entails in *Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 352.

affirmed. This restoration is possible through the sacrificial love of Christ. Christ has restored us to original righteousness because of his selfless death on the cross.<sup>26</sup>

Harville Hendrix is a marriage counselor who uses this restoration to original righteousness to good effect. He suggests to couples on the verge of separation that they revisit the reasons that they fell in love in the first place.<sup>27</sup> They can reignite the initial spark of attraction, affection, and love that they had for each other. Retracing the steps of commitment they made at the beginning of their relationship breaks the power struggle occurring after years of marriage. Forgiveness, forbearance, and acts of love enable couples to move past issues of power and control.

The Celebrate Recovery program is similar. CR facilitators hand out a worksheet in lessons nine, ten, and eleven that asks participants to write down good qualities about themselves. Looking at positive characteristics balances the hurt that one has experienced and harm that one has committed.<sup>28</sup> Confessing what has gone wrong in Principle 4<sup>29</sup> gives way to forgiveness and absolution. Having been cleansing from the power of sin, offenders reaffirm aspects of themselves that have been left behind.

Affirming the fact that we were originally good and righteous shows us that love and faith and hope are possible. Good characteristics existed within our core being when we were young. These elements of trust, faith, hope, and love can be reclaimed.

### Beatific Vision

The Catholic Catechism refers to a beatific vision as a mystical experience in which God opens up divine “mystery to man’s immediate contemplation and gives him capacity for it.”<sup>30</sup> Images in the Scripture that point to this indescribable experience of the divine are “life, light, peace, wedding feast, wine of the kingdom, the Father’s house, the heavenly Jerusalem, and paradise.”

I can speak to this reality on an existential level. We as a family moved to Alberta twenty-five years ago so I could work at a prison nearby. I experienced what can be

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<sup>26</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1987-2005.

<sup>27</sup> Harville Hendrix, *Getting the Love You Want*, 119-130.

<sup>28</sup> John Baker, Taking an Honest and Spiritual Inventory, Participants Guide 2, *Celebrate Recovery Inside* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 29.

<sup>29</sup> “Openly examine and confession my faults to myself, to God, and to someone I trust,” John Baker, *Celebrate Recovery Inside* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 11.

<sup>30</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1026-1028. “This mystery of blessed communion with God and all who are in Christ is beyond all understanding and description. Scripture speaks of it in images: life, light, peace, wedding feast, wine of the kingdom, the Father’s house, the heavenly Jerusalem, paradise. . . . God cannot be seen as he is, unless he himself open up his mystery to man’s immediate contemplation and gives him the capacity for it. The Church calls this contemplation of God in his heavenly glory ‘the beatific vision.’”

referred to as a beatific vision. Neither faith nor reason was an intricate aspect of the experience. It was a feeling, deep emotion, desire, and envelopment of my whole being within what I would describe as the intimacy of God.<sup>31</sup> It was a powerful experience of affection and love. God was present within my life to such a degree that I was inspired to continue to work as a prison chaplain for the next twenty-five years.

Part of the reason I had such a powerful experience was because prison is not a place that one really wants to enter. It is a place that I never dreamed of “living in.” I had been a pastor. I wanted to become a university professor. I was an academic. I came from a good family. I had a good family. I had any number of close friends. Why would I want to diminish those fulfilling realities by working in a prison?

Against my better judgement, I fell in love with the ministry. I was able to “speak into” a variety of situations that required my assistance. I learned more about ecumenism and inter-faith dialogue in Archambault and Leclerc and Cowansville and Federal Training Centre that I did in ten years studying religion and theology at McGill University.

There was a reality to prison life that I could not find in books or in pastoring. “Snap” decisions were required in innumerable situations. I had to trust my judgment to answer difficult requests. God was with me. I could not manage numerous situations in which I became involved.<sup>32</sup>

This initial foray into prison life does not explain the need for a beatific vision. Any new job or career gives a person the energy to meet a new challenge and find work fulfilling. The same satisfaction is not as evident ten years down the road. The job has become routine, there are family and social concerns, children to raise, and new hobbies and sports to get involved in. A renewal is necessary in order for a career to continue to be meaningful.

This is especially true of prison chaplaincy. Prison life may appear infinitely boring and routine. Anyone living and working in that environment can attest to a broad range of pressures that slowly squeeze life out of a person. The sheer number of demands on a daily basis is exhausting.

The need for a beatific vision becomes evident. The prison is such a negative place to work that one is forced to contemplate how to survive and thrive in that

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<sup>31</sup> I wrote a book entitled. *The Intimate Presence of God*, based on this experience.

<sup>32</sup> Some examples are included in Donald Stoesz, *Glimpses of Grace*, 18-19, 21-22, 57-58, 60-61, 63.

environment. The beatific vision represented for me an ecstatic experience of divine intimacy because that was precisely what was missing in a place like prison.

Inmates are hungry for attention, for love, for acceptance, and for affirmation. They are hungry because all of those things have been taken away from them as a result of their offences. They invited and received vilification for what they had done.

Outside observers may say that offenders should not expect anything except judgment and punishment for what they have done. This statement is true at one level. It is another thing for a staff member to choose to work in that environment, to listen to inmates' complaints and incessant badgering, to empathize at some level, and to intervene in so many other situations. Staff cannot escape the vilification directed at inmates. They are the ones who vicariously absorb the pain of it all.<sup>33</sup>

The beatific vision was a liberating experience for me because of the sheer oppressiveness of this cauldron of care. The vision had directly to do with what was missing. Knowledge of God was readily available while seeing God was not really possible. Experiencing the intimacy of God was real precisely because this sense of belonging within Being itself was missing in a prison environment.

I had been part of a loving family when I grew up. I was part of a loving family when I married and we had children. That love was not extended in the same way to the inmates with whom I worked. I could talk about the love that I had for them only in a tangential way. I was not there when they went to bed at night, when they had nightmares about their crimes and their losses, when they lived with dread and shame and guilt.

The intimacy of God was the only thing I had to offer. That affection was the only reality that could counteract the loves that they had lost. They could experience the intimacy of God in the same way that I had, through intense meditation on the sheer hell of it all. One was lifted from the oppression precisely at the point when it became the severest.<sup>34</sup> It was like Herod's killing of the children at Christ's birth and Judas' betrayal of Christ at his arrest and crucifixion. The moment of greatest evil occurred when God shone most brightly. The sheer depression of the job forced me to experience real love and closeness to God.

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<sup>33</sup> The movie, *Monster's Ball*, DVD (Lionsgate Films, 2001), depicts the oppression of such an environment. I comment on the movie in Donald Stoesz, *Glimpses of Grace*, 66.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. my discussion of mysticism and asceticism, Donald Stoesz with Hank Dixon, *A Prison Chaplaincy Manual*, 149.

Emotions and passions represent roots of many crimes that offenders have committed. Emotions and feelings have to be owned and accepted and embraced in order for restoration to happen. Discovering the power of intimacy represented a way of channeling these desires. The intimacy of God was real. One owned what was lost in order to experience life in a divine way.

Courses like *Experiencing God* and *The Purpose Driven Life* are popular because they speak about a relationship with God.<sup>35</sup> They speak about the fact that God wants to have a “loving relationship” with us. God wants to be “our Friend,” “our Comforter,” and “our Lord.” These courses talk about a loving relationship with God because so few offenders know what it is like to have a loving relationship with anyone else.

This way of talking about God can be extended to images of bride and bridegroom. Mark 2:19 speaks about the disciples feasting with the bridegroom while Jesus is still with them. Matthew 25:10 talks about ten bridesmaids going to the wedding feast of the bridegroom. Ephesians 6:29-32 speaks about Christ loving the church in the same way that husbands love their wives. John refers to the church as a bride because of the fellowship, intimacy, and care experienced there (Revelation 19:7).

The Church represents a fellowship of believers that love each other. We experience God in a very personal sense in this womb of care. This love substitutes for the lack of concern and care and love that inmates experience within a prison context. I experienced a real level of fellowship with these men as part of the body of Christ.

A beatific vision is sometimes necessary for a person to be sustained in ministry. It represents a powerful antidote to the misery, bleakness, and despair that is experienced in a prison setting.

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<sup>35</sup> Donald Stoesz with Hank Dixon, *A Prison Chaplaincy Manual*, 155-157.