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### NEWS UPDATES

# Seminarian Brings Ignatian Spirituality to Inmates

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Karri Backer's path to the priesthood has not been direct or traditional. She was a high-school dropout who disliked and distrusted organized religion. She now has college degrees from UCLA and Antioch University and is working on a third, a master's in divinity from Claremont School of Theology's joint program with Bloy House, the Episcopal Theological School at Claremont.

A social worker who found her way back to the church, she enrolled in Claremont after her home church, St. Mark's, Upland, Calif., encouraged her to become a priest when she was considering the diaconate.

Perhaps it's not surprising that her internship at Claremont School of Theology is also non-traditional.

For two years now, Backer has been leading contemplative prayer groups for men in Tower Two of the Twin Towers Correctional Facility in downtown Los Angeles, which houses the most severe offenders.

"It's a really hard gig, and she's doing some great work there," said Andrew Dreitcer, Ph.D., one of her professors at Claremont. "She is using spiritual formation techniques in a place where they are sorely needed and extremely difficult to deliver."

"It is a very harsh environment," almost all concrete, metal and Plexiglas," Backer said. "Often the TV is blaring, and in some units the men are in isolation up to 22 hours a day."

Backer has been assisting at the correctional facility in a combination internship for Claremont and a part-time chaplaincy job. The work is often intense. Not many people could handle it successfully, Dreitcer said.

Backer attributes any progress to the divine spark that she sees in each of the men, sometimes almost completely buried, but still there. She also praises her faculty advisers, Dreitcer and Frank Rogers, Jr., Ph.D., who help her understand her experiences and offer advice, including prayers from different religious traditions that may meet prisoners' needs.

"I often teach groups Ignatian Active Imagination Prayer, where they enter into a gospel story and imagine themselves as a part of the narrative," Backer said. "I frequently do the Prodigal Son because it is so relevant to them."

When teaching the prayer I let the group know that they should follow the promptings of the Spirit working within them, so that they learn to trust themselves and follow these interior invitations. It helps connect them to their true selves, and becomes a space for them to meet the sacred. They are very engaged because they find the experience so meaningful. One guy told me, 'I didn't know that I could pray,' and some guys are so moved that they cry."

Backer tries to meet the men where they are, listen closely and pick up cues on whether they want to talk about forgiveness and repentance. Some choose to engage in the formal sacrament of reconciliation.

Her chaplaincy at Twin Towers involves more than ministry among inmates.

"We are chaplains for the whole facility, including the staff and deputies," Backer said. "They have a very difficult job, which can take a toll. Many of the men in Twin Towers have committed extremely serious crimes. At times it can be difficult to remember their humanity. I think this is easier for us chaplains, because it is our job, and we have permission to remember this even when all the evidence suggests otherwise. Sometimes deputies have asked me how I can do this work with these men. I see these times as an opportunity, not only to talk about what the experience is like for me, but to talk about what it is like for them."

Backer is teaching a group in a segregated unit for men who have been arrested under the city's anti-gang injunctions.

"I am really struggling with the gang-injunction situation right now," Backer said. "It's a real Catch-22 for the guys. Their neighborhoods are more healthy and stable because of the gang injunctions. This gives them a much better chance of going straight, and several of them want to. But when they leave jail to return to their neighborhoods and start sincerely trying to live a respectable life, they can still be picked up for almost anything."

She tells of one 19-year-old from Pomona. He had started attending Mt. San Antonio College and was turning his life around. He was living at home with his mother, and a policeman saw him in the yard with her and picked him up and took him to jail. That's the second time he's been arrested in six months, and Backer said he feels like he'll never complete school.

"Every time they are picked up and spend a couple of months in jail, they are on the injunction list for another three to five years," Backer said. "They would almost have to move away and cut off all their ties with their families and friends in order to begin anew, but these guys are not equipped to do that. These men have never moved from their neighborhoods, and when a judge suggests that they do, they do not see it as a possibility. They feel really helpless and angry about being on the injunction list, as if it's a life sentence."

Backer hopes to start a support group for men with injunctions against them. It would provide help and encouragement when they first get out of jail and help them master skills they need for a decent life, such as enrolling in substance-abuse treatment programs and community colleges.

"I have found that [Zen Buddhist monk] Thich Nhat Hanh's meditative prayer techniques are effective for teaching them how to separate themselves from their anger," Backer said. "He says that instead of trying to stifle your anger, bathe it in compassion, let it know that it is heard and understood. Then you can deal with it. He has parables about anger. He says if someone lights your house on fire, how much sense does it make to run after that person, instead of staying to put out the fire? These really resonate with the men.

"The guys are so pleased and appreciative of what we do," Backer added, "but there are 4,500 men in the Twin Towers and there's no way we can get to all of them. There aren't enough chaplains. I really believe they have the spark of divinity waiting to be born in them, like everyone else. To help them expand that is really wonderful. The work is hard but I love it."

*Claudia Pearce*