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# OUR PATHWAY TO GOD: TOUCH

TOM RYAN SM

**I**N LITERATURE speaking of touch, prayer and God, the text most often used is one cited in the previous article on Sight in this journal. In 1 John 1:1, the witnesses of the incarnation say how 'we...have touched with our hands...the Word, who is life.' This underlines what is more explicitly stated in the Prologue of John's Gospel: 'The Word was made flesh, he lived among us, and we saw his glory, the glory that is his as the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth' or in Paul's comment that 'the full content of divine nature lives in Christ, in his humanity' (Col. 2:9). These texts highlight how touch is immediately associated with embodiment, of God embodied in Jesus, and of the central role materiality plays in revealing the glory of God.

Similarly, recourse was earlier made to Augustine: 'you *touched* me, and I burned for your peace.' The response to God's touch, for Augustine, is marked by its affective quality. He is moved by the divine gesture. More importantly, once aroused his whole person feels impelled to respond with deepened desire and intense devotion.

In the light of these texts, touch, perhaps uniquely amongst our senses, engages us in our identity as embodied beings, in our vulnerability, in the relational aspect of personhood and in faith as a knowing of God. Let's explore these.

## *Traces of the Divine*

There is something primordial, with touch. We resort to it when someone is lost for words—a reassuring hand, a gentle hug. Even in silence, something is still communicated.

When words hit a wall, touch can open a door, even to a person's inner depths so that, perhaps in tears, they can be shared.

Again, with a couple, a touch of the fingers can signal a shift to another level in the relationship. Its growth can be measured by the various stages of physical intimacy. Alternatively, it is touch that suggests the space around our person. When we are hurt, we instinctively protect ourselves ('don't touch me'). Even (or especially) in emotional pain, it is through our bodies that our vulnerability is expressed.

Again, our body is a marker of who we are. We leave clues of our presence everywhere. Personal identity is captured in the uniqueness of the fingerprint or of DNA. As the burglar will cover the soles of his shoes or wear gloves so too will the detective at the crime scene so as not to 'contaminate' the crime scene.

We cannot hide from our bodies. Our bodies, especially touch, 'give us away' (an apt phrase, as we shall see later). It is in the sense of touch, in particular, that the mystery of our humanity is captured. In a way, all our senses can be reduced to touch - through light or sound waves for sight and hearing or through molecules for taste, smell and touch. What does this say about God and us? I will anchor these reflections in Mark 1:40-45 and John 20:24-9. We can gather insights from these texts about touch in relation to a) God, vulnerability and suffering; b) the knowing of faith.

## *What Jesus' Touch Reveals about God*

In Mark 1: 40-45, notice how Jesus

spontaneously reaches out to make physical contact with the leper through touch. Think of other times when he does this. It is almost as if Jesus could not help himself. His deep compassion urges Him to reassure, to console, to heal, especially through physical contact.

Here, Jesus' physical contact is with the leper, namely, someone 'unclean.' In a close-living community, heightened sensitivity to communicable skin conditions that aren't understood is further compounded by a religious aura. The skin complaint is both contagious and a pointer to someone being at odds with God ('sinful'). In a sense, they are 'quarantined' but it takes the form of extreme religious and social exclusion.

There are two 'risks' here. The man ignores the Law's prescriptions and approaches Jesus and begs for help. He not only believes that Jesus has the power to make him clean, 'a power the biblical tradition attributes to God alone.' Like other desperate figures in Mark's Gospel (e.g. woman with the hemorrhage 5: 25-34), 'he displays a faith prepared to break through barriers.'<sup>1</sup>

There is also a risk for Jesus. Physical contact with the 'leper' renders Jesus ritually unclean, hence, socially and religiously excluded. Unable to attend the Synagogue, Jesus has to live temporarily on the fringes of the community. He is like an outcast, existing in a condition from which the healed man had been freed.

Here, we find God, in love and compassion, embracing our vulnerable humanity and, in the process, revealing a divine vulnerability to suffering. Jesus is open to rejection, to physical and emotional pain. From the start of his public life, Jesus shows, in his contact with others, his desire to be in solidarity with all humanity, especially with society's victims. This episode, then, is not an isolated act. Byrne points out that it 'anticipates the whole costly 'entrance' of the Son of God into the 'uncleanness' and alienation of the human situation that will



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come to a climax as he dies on the cross.'<sup>2</sup>

Touch, in this context, has two complementary aspects. Jesus, in touching the man in 'all his dehumanizing disfigurement, so in his Passion, he most radically 'touches' the whole human condition.' Alternatively, in subverting the unclean/clean boundary, being 'unclean' is not something that Jesus 'catches' from physical contact. The opposite is the case. All who, despite 'feelings of moral or physical disfigurement' approach Jesus in faith 'catch' healing and wholeness from him.'<sup>3</sup> Divine 'touch', in its vulnerability, is both inclusive and life-giving. Again, we see here how touch is inherently relational. We can see and hear from a distance. But touch is the sense that engages us most closely. It is related to the whole person as an embodied subject. To paraphrase Newton's Third Law of Motion: you cannot touch without being touched back. But more can be said about touch, compassion, vulnerability and suffering.

### *A God Who Suffers*

In his study of kenotic theology, Oliver Davies argues that compassion exposes the other-orientated character of consciousness, hence, of existence as inter-subjective. To be moved by compassion is a feature of the structure of consciousness.<sup>4</sup> He draws on Martha Nussbaum's defence of compassion as 'the basic social emotion.'<sup>5</sup> Aquinas is of the same view when, for instance, he cites St. Ambrose on the Good Samaritan (Luke

10:37). 'For relationship does not make a neighbour, but compassion, for compassion is according to nature.<sup>6</sup> For nothing is so natural as to assist one who shares our nature.' Both Aquinas and Davies argue that, in compassion, one can discern an identifiable triadic structure: we are exposed to another's distress (cognition), we feel moved by what we see (affective) and we take active steps to try to remedy it (volitional). These elements are present in Jesus' encounter with the leper. Davies' aim is a phenomenological study on how the compassion of God accomplished in Jesus Christ is 'an epiphany of infinite being',<sup>7</sup> something again reflected in the same incident.

If Jesus is the fullest revelation of God, what can we learn here? There are two aspects for consideration.

First, we look to Aquinas and his treatment of compassion and mercy. He argues that *miseriordia* (connoting alleviating distress and extending forgiveness) is most properly attributed to God such that God's power is revealed 'most of all' (*maxime*) in divine compassion and mercy. Aquinas appeals to the Church's worship to clinch his argument.<sup>8</sup> He cites what is now the Collect for the 26th Sunday of Ordinary Time: 'O God, you manifest your almighty power above all by pardoning and showing mercy...' In addition, Aquinas's fellow Dominican Meister Eckhart said, 'You may call God love; you may call God goodness; but the best name for God is Compassion.'<sup>9</sup>

Elsewhere, Aquinas says that compassion and mercy are the source of all God's works. In so doing, Aquinas uncovers in *miseriordia* a third dimension, beyond relieving distress and offering forgiveness. It befits God to compensate for creaturely limitation, impelling it towards further self-transcendence.<sup>10</sup> There is a certain convergence between Aquinas and Davies for whom, compassion, with love, shares a foundational character 'so that it is not so much a particular virtue as a self-

dispossessive attitude of mind which makes the particular virtues possible.'<sup>11</sup>

Second, if, as Aquinas argues, it is through *miseriordia* that we can have some understanding of what is uniquely constitutive of the divine identity, we are still left with a question: in what way can we speak with any truth about the 'suffering' of God? How do we preserve divine perfection yet take seriously the divine vulnerability where the triune God is moved, as the Scripture says, to his very depths?

Aquinas observes that, because of the unity of divine and human natures in a single person, Jesus of Nazareth, it is possible to say that Jesus' suffering is itself the very suffering of God.<sup>12</sup> Jacques Maritain points out that Aquinas's response, while true, 'leaves the mind unsatisfied.'<sup>13</sup> How can we speak of divine distress at our distress, as an element in the perfection of the divine Being and also as an expression God's knowing and loving? Alternatively, as Maritain expresses it, '[S]hould we not say of mercy, then, that it exists in God according to what it is, and not only according to what it does?'<sup>14</sup> Together Aquinas and Maritain offer an approach to this mystery.

If God is considered as the plenitude of Being, Aquinas says that all created goodness arises from divine loving.<sup>15</sup> By viewing compassion or the 'pain of God' in terms of the depth of God's being and love, one can appeal, as does Maritain, to the notion of divine perfections that are *nameless* and implying no imperfection. He argues that compassion and mercy exist in God as a perfection of the divine being

for which there is no name: a glory or splendor unnamed, implying no imperfection, unlike what we call suffering or sorrow, and for which we have no idea, no concept, and no name that would be applicable to God.<sup>16</sup>

Maritain notes that the suffering of human love is a reality that is not totally negative. Together with its 'deprivation,' it carries something positive, noble, fertile and

precious, in other words, a perfection. Its analogate in God, namely, its unnameable and deeply mysterious 'exemplar,' is the merciful suffering of God as a part of God's 'happiness and beyond what is humanly conceivable.'<sup>17</sup> There is, undoubtedly, suffering that is not compatible with the absolute perfection of God. Nevertheless, Maritain argues, there is a 'hurt of God,' a reality beyond concepts and language, that is a pure perfection. The deep mystery of the unspeakable sorrow that evil, sin and suffering causes God brings, not divine disintegration, but rather reveals the 'unsuspected grandeur' of the Godhead. The human analogate of this unutterable 'hurt' or compassion as a perfection in the heart of God is *magnanimity*—'the nobility that sorrow carries with it when it is overcome by greatness of soul.'<sup>18</sup>

In reflecting on touch as associated with vulnerability and suffering, both human and divine, the spotlight has fallen on compassion (co-suffering). In sharing in the divine life, we too are inescapably called to 'be compassionate as your Father is compassionate' (Lk. 6:36). Here, we can learn from the French School of Spirituality where the transformation wrought by the divine indwelling (deification) is seen in the context of Jesus and his earthly life.

In being united to Jesus, we can, now, unite ourselves to his interior 'states' that encapsulate, so to speak, the different moments of his life, death and resurrection. We can make our own—for our salvation and sanctification—the essence of the mysteries of Jesus in the womb of the Virgin, born at Bethlehem, hidden at Nazareth, preaching and healing in Galilee and Judea, suffering and dying in Jerusalem, risen and ascended into heaven. We can share both in the compassion of Jesus as he touches the leper and in His vulnerability in being a social outcast. By pondering prayerfully the details of the Gospel narratives, we are to penetrate beyond the event itself to the attitude of

Jesus towards his Father and towards his fellow human-beings. We are called to share in divine magnanimity noted above—the 'nobility that sorrow carries with it when it is overcome by greatness of soul.' This brings us to another phase of the discussion.

### *Touch and the Knowing of Faith*

Let's ponder John 20: 24-9 with the help of Francis J Moloney.<sup>19</sup> Though surrounded by the signs of Easter faith (peace and joy), Thomas remains in the darkness of unfaith. Notice how Thomas' final step to faith in the Risen Jesus is by his Master's appeal to touch. This is consistent with the other scenes after Jesus had risen. Reassurance comes from something 'bodily'—eating fish, Mary Magdalene hearing her name, the disciples recognizing Jesus in the breaking of the bread. Thomas' first step towards faith is that he is 'only prepared to lay aside his unfaith if the risen Jesus meets his criteria', namely, that Jesus be 'touchable.' In the appearance eight days later, Jesus offers to 'fulfill Thomas's conditions' but also to go beyond faith based on certain conditions: 'put your finger here: look, here are my hands. Give me your hand; put it into my side. Doubt no longer but believe.' Thomas forgets the ritual he requested of touching Jesus' wounds. He responds to the challenge of faith with 'My Lord and My God.'<sup>20</sup>

But this scene underlines two other points. First, It anticipates the words of 1 Peter 2:24-25 that allude to Isaiah 53:4-5: 'through his wounds you have been healed.' Or as another phrase says: 'Where he (Jesus) is most disfigured, there he is most glorified.' When is Jesus revealed as most fully human and most fully God? It is in the self-giving love in his death, at the point of being torn between abandonment and surrender. When Jesus is most helpless, he is most open in his humanity to receiving the 'utter fullness of God.' We image God

and grow in divine likeness in same pattern—in our flawed, wounded but loved and redeemed humanity.

Second, Thomas's faith journey, as with that of Mary Magdalene, looks ahead to future generations, to the readers of the Gospel story. 'There is a 'quality of faith without sight surpassing the faith that generated Thomas's confession.' This faith is not dependent on the physical presence of Jesus (as in seeing and touching) but characterizes those who 'believe *in the absence of Jesus*'<sup>21</sup> (to be discussed in the final section of this article).

### ***Touch and Relationships.***

We saw earlier how we can see and hear from a distance and that touch is the sense that engages us most closely in that it is related to the whole body. There is something essentially relational about touch. Hosea uses the image of God as a parent who lifts Israel as 'an infant close against his cheek' (11.18). Touch can range from brushing against someone, to placing a reassuring hand briefly on another's, to holding, hugging, embracing, clinging or kissing. With touch, there is a trajectory towards increasing union and intimacy. There is also the regenerative and healing power of touch. Diarmuid O'Murchu reminds us that, through touch, we 'begin to experience both the complexity and the intimacy of the mystery within which we are held.'<sup>22</sup>

Touch is closely linked with our sexuality. Both are used as metaphors in God's relationship with us. God is the passionate and faithful Lover (see *The Songs of Songs*). Pope John Paul II notes how we can discover 'in the body the anticipatory signs, the expression and promise of the gift of self.'<sup>23</sup> Timothy Radcliffe says that sexual intimacy is saying through the body 'I give myself to you, without reserve, now and forever, and I receive all of you as a gift'<sup>24</sup> It is an act of 'telling the truth' with our bodies in an act of

mutual sharing of vulnerability. Our bodies truly 'give us away.'

This captures beautifully how our sexuality gives us a glimpse of the way God holds us in his arms and treasures us. It also reminds us that we are called to image God in our bodies and our sexuality. We are meant to delight in the other person, in their very existence, in their vulnerability, just as God delights in us.

It is through our bodies that we *belong*. Our bodiliness is the very site of worship. It mediates God's presence and action, as in the sacraments. It is in our bodies that are baptized. We are anointed on the skin with oil, nourished with consecrated bread and wine. Without our body, where do we belong? The early Christian author Tertullian said that 'the flesh is the hinge of salvation.' Without the gift of my body, I cannot be my true self. I cannot be an image of God. The Word Made Flesh is God's guarantee of this. It is summed up in 'this is my body, given for you.'

Touch and its suggestions of depth and belonging remind us that we do *not pray alone*. It is always in Jesus to the Father. It is always within the community of faith. Finally, in *Meeting Mystery*, Nathan Mitchell reminds us that prayer is about '*being* connected and *making* connections'—to God, people, and the world around us.

A final thought in this section. Sometimes, we often struggle to accept that we are images of God precisely as embodied beings. Do we really believe that God's fullness is given and revealed in the humanity of Jesus?

There may be two reasons for our difficulty. First, bringing desires, body and spirit into harmony is a struggle. We can easily think that the body is the seat of sin. But, in fact, it is the will.

Second, 'body' and 'flesh' in Scripture need to be carefully understood. God loves the 'body' in which, as we know, Jesus expresses the fullness of his divinity. The word 'flesh' (Greek *sarx*) for Paul denotes 'the whole



person from a particular aspect: the aspect of frailty, mortality, proneness to sin, hostility to God...it is in the flesh that sin gets its base of operations in human nature.<sup>125</sup> The 'unspiritual' aspect of the total self is what pulls me away from God or opposes God. It describes radical selfishness and the desire to be completely autonomous—to set our own boundaries of the moral universe. Alternatively, *pneuma* denotes the whole person as open to God (as 'spiritual') and one can only persevere in the spiritual combat with the help and energy of the Spirit (*Pneuma*). . This is the inward struggle Paul talks about in Romans Ch. 7. It is not a battle between 'spirit' (good) and body or 'flesh' (evil)].

This brings us to our final consideration: how faith in God is expressed in terms of 'touching God' or 'being touched by God.' How is this understood figuratively and analogically in the Christian spiritual tradition?

### ***God: Touching and Being Touched***

It was noted in an earlier article that hearing best captures the receptive/reactive aspect of interpersonal relationships and, in particular, the call/response dynamic with God. But taste and touch seem best attuned to capturing the increasing sense of closeness in relationship and to their intimate and unitive aspects. This appears to be the approach of some writers in the tradition, particularly in relation to the knowing of faith as expressed by recourse to the language and imagery of the five senses. Our focus is on the sense of touch found in the knowing of faith in the Risen Lord who is present but also, in a physical sense, absent (as discussed above concerning John 20).

We have noted, in earlier discussions, that the practice of analogical recourse to the bodily senses for imagery to describe the soul and spiritual realities generally was common to all traditions in the patristic and medieval

periods. Denys Turner observes that a distinct feature of voluntarist traditions of Medieval spirituality was that their imagery was derived by analogy from the senses of touch, taste and smell rather than those of sight and hearing.<sup>26</sup> For instance, twelfth and thirteenth century writers such as Alexander of Hales, Thomas Gallus, Bonaventure and Bernard of Clairvaux took the *Song of Songs* as their point of departure. For them, in the mystical ascent, spiritual sight and hearing 'were toppled by spiritual touch as the mode of perception implying a closer contact with the subject.' This insight is aligned with Augustine's dictum: 'touch is the end of knowing.'<sup>27</sup> Where a more intellectual approach gave priority to sight and hearing in relation to those other three senses linked to the body's vital needs (as for Aristotle), this more affective approach follows the Dionysian principle: 'the higher a reality is on the scale of excellence the more appropriate it is to use images of lower things to describe it.' Hence, the higher forms of theological contemplation are 'best imaged by the lower senses of touch, taste and smell.'<sup>28</sup>

Alexander of Hales is illuminating on touch. He arranges the senses in terms of proximity to their object. Faith's vision and hearing of divine things as truth are the most distant. The most "intimate and certain knowledge of God' comes from the perception of divine goodness through scent, taste and especially touch. With touch, there is a form of direct and immediate contact such that, like taste, one cannot but be affected by what is apprehended. For Alexander (and Bonaventure), when describing intimacy with God, touch (and taste) have priority. Following 1 Cor 6: 17 ('But anyone who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with him'), touch belongs to charity and is an act of adhering, namely, when one perceives through experience that 'one is one spirit with God.' Coolman notes that, for Alexander, as for Thomas Gallus and Augustine, the goal and fulfillment of 'all spiritually sensuous knowledge' is to 'touch



God.<sup>129</sup>

Continuing this theme into the twentieth century, Mark McInroy points out that for Karl Rahner, in his reading of Bonaventure on the spiritual senses, 'spiritual touch confers an immediate experience of God that takes place in the *apex affectus*, the 'deepest' part of the human being. Through the touch of God at this deepest point, there arises a consciousness of this direct union of love without any active role of the intellect. The soul experiences God immediately in the ground of its being ...all knowledge is left behind 'and the experience remains obscure ...God is here the dark fire of love.'<sup>130</sup>

### Conclusion

The sense of touch, whether viewed physically or figuratively, has a unique role in prayer, in our relationship with God and in our spiritual journey. Its inherently bodily character captures both human vulnerability and the impulse towards union. Its expression, through hands and bodily contact, can follow a path from momentary contact through to caressing and embracing. Perhaps touch is the

sense that is most associated with giving and receiving and is paradigmatic of the Trinity's image in our person and relationships, It finds its fullest human expression in sexual intimacy where we 'give ourselves away' in an expression of shared vulnerability. It is for good reason that being touched by God in spiritual ecstasy is portrayed in erotic form, as in Bernini's sculpture of St Teresa of Avila. Touch and being touched can lead to surrender and trusting abandonment into the hands of another, epitomized in Jesus' cry from the cross in handing himself into the hands of his Abba Father.

Let's leave the final word to Morris West from *The Shoes of the Fisherman*:

It costs so much to be a full human being that there are very few who have the enlightenment or the courage to pay the price...One has to abandon altogether the search for security, and reach out to the risk of living with both arms. One has to embrace the world like a lover. One has to accept pain as a condition of existence. One has to court doubt and darkness as the cost of knowing. One needs a will stubborn in conflict, but apt always to total acceptance of every consequence of living and dying.

### NOTES

1. Brendan Byrne, *A Costly Freedom A Theological Reading of Mark's Gospel* (Strathfield, NSW: St. Pauls, 2008), 49.
2. *Ibid.*, 51.
3. *Ibid.*, 51.
4. Oliver Davies, *A Theology of Compassion: Metaphysics of Difference and the Renewal of Tradition* (United Kingdom: SCM; USA: Grand Rapids Mich: Eerdmans, 2001), 17.
5. Martha Nussbaum, 'Compassion: The Basic Social Emotion,' *Social Philosophy and Policy* 13:1(1996): 27-58. She has a later and more expanded treatment in *Upheavals of Thought*.
6. *Catena Aurea*, Trans. J.H. Newman (London: The Saint Austin Press, 1999), 377.
7. Davies, *A Theology of Compassion*, 271.
8. *Summa Theologiae* 2.2.30. 4 (Henceforth ST).
9. Cited in Matthew Fox, *A Spirituality Named Compassion* [Minnesota, MN: Winston Press, 1979], 34.
10. 'If we consider every work of God at its primary source, we see that *misericordia* is present. This is

- because God, out of the abundance of His goodness, bestows on creatures what is due to them more generously than is demanded by what is fitting for a particular thing's nature' (ST 1.2. 21.4. Author's translation. Also, ST 1.25. 3, ad 3
11. Davies, *A Theology of Compassion*, 18.
12. ST 3.16. 2 - 4
13. Jacques Maritain, 'Quelques réflexions sur le savoir théologique,' *Revue Thomiste* 69 (1969) 5-27 cited in Gilles Emery, OP, *Trinity, Church and the Human Person: Thomistic Essays* (Sapientia Press, 2007), 254.
14. Emery, *Trinity, Church and the Human Person*, 254. Italics in original.
15. 'The love of God is actively infusive and creative of the goodness of things' (ST I 20. 2).
16. Cited in Emery, *Trinity, Church and the Human Person*, 254.
17. Cited in Emery, *Trinity, Church and the Human Person*, 254.
18. Cited in Emery, *Trinity, Church and the Human Person*, 256. In this section, I have drawn on ideas

- developed in an earlier article: 'Aquinas on Compassion: Has He Anything To Offer Today?' *Irish Theological Quarterly* 75:2, May 2010, 157-174.
19. Francis J Moloney, *Glory not Dishonour: Reading John 13-21* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 177-179.
20. Moloney, *Glory*, 176-7.
21. Moloney, *Glory*, 179.
22. Diarmuid O'Murchu, *The Transformation of Desire* (London: DLT, 2007), 78.
23. *Veritatis Splendor*; (Homebush NSW, St Pauls, 1993), 48.
24. Timothy Radcliffe, 'The Joy of giving ourselves', *The Tablet*, Feb. 23, 2008, 12-13.
25. Brendan Byrne SJ, *Reckoning with Romans: A Contemporary Reading of Paul's Gospel* (Wilmington DW: Glazier, 1986), 142.
26. Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge, UK: CUP, 1995), 200.
27. Paul Gavrilyuk & Sarah Coakley, *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity* (New York and Cambridge UK: CUP, 2012), Introduction, 9.
28. Turner, *The Darkness*, 201.
29. Boyd Taylor Coolman, 'Alexander of Hales' in Gavrilyuk & Coakley, *The Spiritual Senses*, 121-139, at 133 and 134.
30. Mark J McInroy, 'Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar' in Gavrilyuk & Coakley, *The Spiritual Senses*, 257-274, at 263.

### **Meditation as a Subversive Activity** by Sarah Coakley

A few years ago I had the opportunity to work for a semester as a chaplain at a Boston jail. My primary work was helping to lead a group of inmates in the practice of silent prayer...

...one of the most striking features of jail life is the continuous level of noise. Without carpets on the floor, with screams of command from the guards regularly punctuating the atmosphere, and with small three-men cells as the locus of ongoing physical tensions and arguments (homosexual rape is a scandalously regular form of violence), jail offers little opportunity for stillness and peace. Many men find it difficult even to close their eyes in the presence of others they fear. Privacy of a sort can be achieved only by demotion to solitary confinement...

...By the end of the term, my 'class' had grown from about 15 to over 40; all were African-American or Latino men between the ages of 17 and about 35, with the exception of two older white men (who always came together for mutual support)...

...Shared silence in peace and solidarity in the context of a jail is possibly the most subversive act of resistance to the jail's culture of terrorization and violence that one might devise. (Occasionally I would catch the eye of the guard who checked on us at regular intervals through the large picture window into the chapel; his look of sheer wonder and simultaneous suspicion was noteworthy.) I learned too that at least some of the men were profoundly interested in reimagining their 'time' as a process of trial and transformation...

... Fumbling to find them materials from the history of Christian spirituality that might fire their imagination, I took in a sheet of selected sayings from the desert fathers that stressed the efficacy of simply 'remaining in one's cell' as a purposive means of monastic self-knowledge. They were as intrigued by these sayings as they were to learn that Christian monasticism started in Africa. ...

Occasionally, as if by miracle, the straining and sweating and shifting of a hard shared silence would transmute into a few minutes of acute and focused stillness. After one such 'miracle' a prison social worker (not a Christian) who was with us that day asked: 'Why is this so wonderful, and so different, when we do it together?' An older African-American prisoner, Terry, replied, 'I've only just become a Christian; but doesn't it say somewhere in the New Testament that when two or three are gathered together Jesus promises to be with us?' I learned that day that such scriptural texts can gain powerful new valency in the prison context.

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