

Nuremberg And Today Jackson Center Hosts Interfaith Panel On Prison Spiritual Care

By Katrina Fuller
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Does everyone truly deserve to hear how much God loves them?

This question and others were raised at an interfaith panel event held at the Robert H. Jackson Center on Wednesday night titled, “The Ethics of Spiritual Care for the Imprisoned: Nuremberg and Today.”

The program focused on the ministry of two men during the Nuremberg Trials, Fr. Sixtus O’Connor and the Rev. Henry Gerecke, who were sent to spiritually tend to the 21 prisoners on trial beginning in 1945.



On Wednesday, the Robert H. Jackson Center hosted an interfaith panel called “The Ethics of Spiritual Care for the Imprisoned: Nuremberg and Today,” which focused on the spiritual care of the prisoners at Nuremberg, as well as current prisoners and the obligations of various religions to them. Pictured from left are: Greg Peterson, co-founder of the Robert H. Jackson Center; Linda Dunn, Temple Beth El president; Maj. Tom Geisler, Lay Chaplain at Collins Correctional Facility; and Sam Qadri, Jamestown Islamic Society director.
P-J photo by Katrina Fuller

The panel discussion included members of the faith community with representatives from Judaism, Christianity and Islam faiths who spoke to what each faith believes when it comes to the repentance and forgiveness of the imprisoned.

Greg Peterson, co-founder of the Robert H. Jackson Center, opened the presentation with a case study of O’Connor and Gerecke.

He said the idea for the event was sparked for the event after he read the book, “Mission At Nuremberg” by Tim Townsend, which delved into the ministry of O’Connor and Gerecke.

“There was an opportunity through Chautauqua Institution to have author Townsend come and talk about the book last year,” Peterson said.

“He talked about this story which dealt with two pastors who were assigned a unique task by the head of the prison at Nuremberg to minister to these individuals who were the defendants. Assigned by the U.S. Army was Pastor Gerecke, who was assigned to minister to 15 prisoners who were German and Lutheran, and the other was Father Sixtus O’Connor who had attended St. Bonaventure University just down the road and he was assigned to the six Catholics.”

He said the book offers an interesting inside look at the experience during this time for Gerecke.

“We don’t know much about that which went on with Father Sixtus O’Connor because everything that was discussed and his feelings he kept to himself under the confessional seal and, only allowed a bit of vignettes here and there,” Peterson said. “The book deals with the bigger issues and the question that forces us to ponder whether we actually believe every human being is capable of redemption.”

He went on to pose a few questions to the audience.

“Did the 21 Nazis who made up Hitler’s inner circle deserve inner peace as they faced possible execution?” Peterson asked. “Did they deserve to hear how much God loved them while on trial for crimes against humanity?”

A presentation was then shown of a speech from 1952 given by the Rev. Gerecke as he explained his experiences with the prisoners at Nuremberg.

Afterward, the Rev. Luke Fodor of St. Luke’s Episcopal Church; Linda Dunn, Temple Beth El president; Maj. Tom Geisler, Lay Chaplain at Collins Correctional Facility; and Sam Qadri, Jamestown Islamic Society director discussed the perspectives of each faith on forgiveness, repentance and the spiritual needs of prisoners.

Fodor acted as a moderator for the discussion, posing questions to each panel member.

Dunn gave an example from a book, “The Sunflower” by Simon Wiesenthal which tells the story of Wiesenthal’s experience during the Holocaust with a wounded Nazi soldier.

She said Wiesenthal was in a concentration camp and was called to the bedside of a critically wounded Nazi soldier who told him a story about a deed he had previously done. The soldier told Wiesenthal that he burned down a house with many Jewish people inside and as they tried to jump out, he shot them.

Dunn said the soldier wanted to ask Wiesenthal for forgiveness because he was Jewish, however Wiesenthal left the room without speaking to the soldier and did not offer forgiveness.

“From a Jewish perspective, Simon Wiesenthal acted correctly,” she said. “God is the only one who can give you atonement. You can only confess your sins to God.”

She said Judaism does recognize sincere repentance.

Qadri said sins can be forgiven by God, but there are different conditions under which this can happen.

“During the five daily prayers, they are looked at as five daily opportunities for forgiveness and to repent,” he said. “If you ask for forgiveness, God will forgive.”

Qadri said that there are conditions that must be met. For example, there may be penalties for some sins such as fasting. Also, if a sin is against another human being, forgiveness must be asked of that person.

“When it comes to incarceration, (Islam) teaches that the community is responsible to guide those who fall short,” Qadri said.

He said when he tells people he works in prison ministry, they say they couldn’t do it.

“They can’t get past the idea of forgiving rapists, murderers and pedophiles,” Geisler said. “As a Christian, it is not a choice. We are commanded by Jesus, the son of God and God himself, to do so. When Jesus assigned us the Great Commission, he didn’t say ‘Therefore go and make disciples of all the nations, baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, but skip those in prison.’”

He said in the Christian faith, love and compassion are a main tenet that is shown in the acts of Christ himself.

“As Jesus was experiencing this excruciating pain as they were crucifying him and he was suffocating - With his last breath as he’s suffocating, he offers comfort and absolution to a repentant criminal next to him,” Geisler said. “He said, ‘Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.’”

All of the panel members agreed that a spiritual path needs to be made available to prisoners.

“It needs to start with the system itself,” Qadri said. “Those inmates do need a spiritual out. When we see these inmates come back to us on a church level, a synagogue level or on a mosque level, they have had a new start.”

Dunn said the teaching that there is a spark of the divine in each person can lift someone up that previously had been in the gutter.

Peterson then closed the program, thanking the panelists and offering a quote from O'Connor from a conversation he had with another priest.

“(O'Connor) said to a fellow priest, ‘You know, Father, you absolve them of their sins, but you don't absolve them of their actions,’” he said.