

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2012/12/25/voices-from-solitary-loneliness-and-faith-at-christmastime/>

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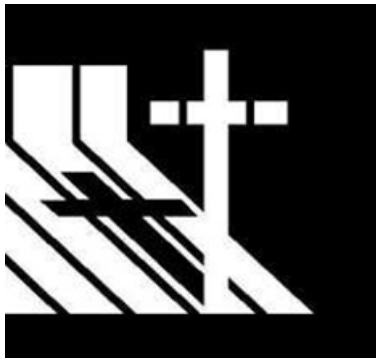
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by [Voices from Solitary](#) | December 25, 2012



*The following essay comes from **Brian Nelson**, who spent 12 years in solitary confinement in Tamms supermax prison in Illinois. Released in 2010, he now works at the Uptown Peoples Law Center, which has been instrumental in the battle to close Tamms a battle that has at last proved successful. Some prisoners have already been moved out of Tamms, while others await transfer, and the supermax is expected to be empty by January 4, 2013. For more of Brian Nelson's descriptions of his time in solitary, [click here](#).*

I was raised as a Catholic at St. Benedict Church in Chicago. Throughout my life I have maintained my beliefs. While confined in prison I was able to continue to practice my faith: Going to Mass, celebrating the Sacraments. I was also able to celebrate the Holy Days as prescribed by the Catholic Church. Celebrating the birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ was a high point each year. At the beginning of Advent I was raised to begin to prepare myself for the Christmas celebration that was shared by the Communion of Saints (this means celebrating Mass together on Christmas Day). The joy of seeing the love on each others face as we celebrate the birth of Our Lord, giving the sign of peace to each other, was a highlight of the season. Even as I was held in prison, I had free access to the chaplain everyday and our priest was at the prison regularly.

In March of 1998 that changed, as I was placed in a supermax prison. When Tamms opened it was designed strictly for sensory deprivation, solitary confinement and as a tool to break all family ties as well as brainwash men into believing they have been abandoned by everyone. Needless to say, I was shocked by the attack upon my religious beliefs upon arrival at Tamms. No longer would I be allowed to attend Mass. No longer would I be granted privacy to say confession to the priest without a correctional officer listening over the speaker in every cell. At times I was even denied my Holy Bible and my Breivary (prayer book). I was told I was not allowed to fast, nor abstain from eating meat. For months I was denied a Rosary. All this regardless of what the Catholic priest told the prison was proper. Sadly he was ignored by Tamms administration.

Surprisingly, this made my faith stronger and, yes, more meaningful. I spent hours studying the history of St. Benedict and began to study the Order of Cistercian of Strict Observance. These are followers of the Rule of St. Benedict. I copied the Rule of St. Benedict three times as the work in the Rule prescribes. I read the Holy Bible completely numerous times, and regardless of what prison officials did to stop me, I fasted, and followed the teachings to the best of my ability. I spent hours praying every day.

Yet I have to admit, at times during the Christmas season I felt depressed and unconnected to other Christians. The Tamms mail room intentionally withheld mail until after Christmas so men felt abandoned and alone. There was no Mass or celebration. Yet my loving mother would do all she could to make Christmas special. I would receive an Advent calendar weeks ahead of time. She would send religious books and she would visit. Other members of the Christian community would also try to reach into the dungeon and share the Word with me. Every man at Tamms would receive Christmas cards from Uptown Peoples Law Center as well as The Tamms Year Ten Committee, to try to demonstrate that even though we were in solitary confinement we were not alone. But Christmas would come and there was no feast, no Mass, no Communion of Saints; there was no family gathering.

I was alone in a Gray Box as are thousands of men and women held in solitary confinement in America. Not even allowed a simple phone to tell of families we love them and Merry Christmas. As children we were raised with the joyful expectation of Christmas morning.

Of being with family and loved ones and celebrating our Lord's birth. Yet in solitary you don't have these hopes of these loving moments. What you have is raw faith and depression in solitude, and never can you express this to those you love and who care about you, because then you would spoil the Christmas celebration for them. To express the loneliness would be to become the Grinch that stole Christmas.

Yet at times, praying, I felt all the love of Our Lord Jesus Christ and all the Christians celebrating. At other times I felt the affects of the Gray Box and complete abandonment. Also I felt the anger at those Christians that treated other Christians as I was being treated. How could they be Christians and treat other human beings so evilly? Then I would pray and pray for an end to such barbaric treatment and for the guidance to be able to help to end the madness of solitary confinement. Christmas is a time of joy yet so many men and women are being tortured in solitary confinement on Christmas day! What would Our Lord Jesus Christ say about this?

The Voices from Solitary series publishes dispatches from people surviving the lived experience of solitary confinement.

Accurate information and authentic storytelling can serve as powerful antidotes to ignorance and injustice. We have helped generate public awareness, mainstream media attention, and informed policymaking on what was once an invisible domestic human rights crisis.

Only with your support can we continue this groundbreaking work, shining light into the darkest corners of the U.S. criminal punishment system.

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September 30, 2022

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September 19, 2022

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@Holley M

One thing I am truly trying to do to help others is to put into words hard learned lessons I've learnt over the years about the penal system. It takes time and effort for someone like me that because I was schooled in institutions lack the basic technical skills to perform as I would hope.

Our family were regular Churchgoers in my youth but in our times of need the Church had nothing but BS for us.

I couldn't help but notice the Cadillac in the driveway and diamond rings on the good father's hand that gave us maggot infested cornmeal and sent us on our way.

We sold our blood to eat and more than once.

I hope that explains myself.

@BJ that is a perfect example of snitches at work.

Thank you Brian for your courage to continue to speak out against the inhumanity of solitary confinement and advocacy for others. I was so moved by the Rolling Stone article about your experience at Tamms. I hope this Christmas and New Years are especially sweet knowing that Tamms is going to be shut down. You continue to be such an inspiration for those prisoners still isolated. St. Benedict (and my patron saint, St. Francis) are very proud of you for embodying the Gospel of Matthew, 25:31-46. Thank you for going on and speaking truth to power, and Merry Christmas.

God bless you.

After 83 Tommy was not a problem for the authority that held him, but he was still a big name for the BOP poster boy if you like, so they sent him to ADX as an example, not taking his clean record after 83 into account, that's set back any progress he has made to go back to GP, Supermax was intended for the worst offenders, Tommy hasn't been in that category for 3 decades, he should never have been sent there, just like he should never have been sent to Marion when he was.

Yes you're both right and it is frightening to think they don't need to tell you anything.

Very powerful testament to the infinite power of God. Many of us find ourselves in a virtual (mental) steel box. But, you were there physically and mentally and only the Omnipotent power of God can give you deliverance. I, too, have a good friend who's been at Tamms since 1998. I also had a chance to meet two other former Tamms men at a Ten Year event. God Bless.

I did not say he did anything wrong I said maybe they framed him in order to justify the transfer. One hopes that at least they have to accuse you of something in order to torture you. It is disturbing and terrifying that they never told him why. I realize that filling the beds has become more important than the facts. But thank you for stressing his innocence but again I did not accuse him of anything.

@CYA, The transfer to the SHU seems all around the country to be mostly unjustified and w/o due process. And snitches seem to play a part in some of these scenarios but the accused may not know. Just my thoughts. And you did start off by referring to the article he never knew why he was sent to supermax.

Brian CYA, I have to comment on several things you said. First, I doubt any group allowed to come into a maximum prison is allowed to come close to the bars or cell doors. The churches do collect money, and it keeps the soup kitchens and homeless shelters going, the food shelves, clothing closets, refugee services, and more. Many people of faith, have worked hard to help prisoners by sending books, by writing letters to inmates or to legislators about conditions, and by visiting. There are some hypocrites in every group. However someone who has never had any dealings at all with jails or prisons isn't likely to understand the issues. What have YOU done for others? Something that doesn't help yourself? So often people who complain that others aren't helping them, have rarely ever done anything to benefit someone else.

Alan CYA you are wrong. Brian never had any trouble at all in New Mexico. This was an example of, if we build it, they will come. Having built a supermax, Illinois brought back all of its out of state prisoners, and without giving any consideration to how they were doing out of state, sent them to the supermax.

He wrote: I spent 12 years in solitary confinement and I was never told why I was placed in solitary.

This is only speculation developed while reading this incredibly frightening story, but his description of having access to the guards car keys where weapons and other contraband items were kept leaves me to believe they suspected him of giving such items to a STG. Maybe a guard had given contraband to some group and when it was discovered they put the blame on him because he had access. Regardless of where the truth lies what resulted is just plain sick.

I too was raised going to Catholic but also Protestant church (my parents were of one of each) unlike this man, during more than a few Christmases behind bars, I never got past these words that he wrote.

I have to admit, at times during the Christmas season I felt depressed and unconnected to other Christians. I felt the anger at those Christians that treated other Christians as I was being treated. How could they be Christians and treat other human beings so evilly?

So I refused to accept their faith but not the belief in a just god.

My faith is in god not in a church filled with so many hypocrites. Oh they have taken my contributions but they have never returned anything to me during my time of need either on the street when I was hungry or while I was incarcerated. Oh they were willing to stand outside our cells (at a SAFE DISTANCE) and sing repentance songs but very little more.

So I still refuse to visit these collection centers and listen to their MASS of hypocrisy.

I need them less than they need my contributions and I believe God will understand if they do not.

Merry Christmas!

Thinking about my pal Tommy Silverstein at this moment in time, may you have a peaceful Christmas, & may you get some relief in the New Year.

What would Jesus say? He told Christians to treat people in prison as they themselves would want to be treated in Hebrews 13:3, they aren't listening.

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