

# Catholic Rural Life

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**The Sacred Heart of Jesus**  
Consecrating the Nation

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# Visiting the Imprisoned



## Freeing Souls Through Kolbe Prison Ministries

By Emily Chaffins

When Kerry Johnston met the chaplain at the Texas prison, he was in for startling news. As they entered the facility together, the gates locking behind them, the chaplain told Johnston, the Kolbe Prison Ministries retreat leader, “For this retreat, four Satanists signed up.”

Johnston was surprised. Kolbe Prison Ministries (KPM), established in 2009, offers Catholic retreats in prisons around the United States. Inmates of all beliefs are welcome to attend, provided their application meets good conduct requirements. Although currently serving as KPM president, back then, Johnston was one of the retreat leaders.

What had drawn Satanists to this three-day Catholic retreat?

At the retreat’s close, an inmate stood up during open mic. “You don’t know,” he said, addressing the volunteers from the “outside” world, “but the guys from the ‘inside’ know me.

I’ve been the leader of the Satanists here.”

Entering the prison’s gymnasium on the first day, the inmate had no idea that the volunteers had set up a makeshift adoration chapel beneath a tarp. And yet, he said, “I felt a force I can’t explain.” Later on, when retreatants had been invited to eucharistic adoration, he decided to go.

What happened next was mind-blowing.

Stepping inside the adoration chapel, he claimed to have had “a mystical experience,” where dead family members had appeared as real as flesh and blood.

“I’m hereby renouncing Satan,” he declared in front of the entire group. “I’m going to become Catholic.”

Remembering that moment, Johnston’s voice is full of awe. “This was potentially a death sentence for him in prison,” he says. Satanists and gangs are known to silence fellow inmates who defect.

And yet this man believed the risk of conversion was worth it.

### Prison Ministry

Johnston describes prison ministry as a “hard sell.” The idea is daunting. Many who volunteer are persuaded through the recommendation of trusted friends. However, once they make the leap, they often get to see God work in incredible and distinctive ways.

“The presence of the Holy Spirit in the prison retreats is almost palpable,” he says. “When Jesus walked the earth, who did He spend time with? Mostly the outcasts, the rejected, the hurting. That describes exactly what the guys and women are like in prison.”

Kolbe Prison Ministries is dedicated to St. Maximilian Kolbe, an Auschwitz martyr and patron saint of prisoners. A non-profit, KPM is totally volunteer-run by an estimated 1,800 men and women covering five states: Texas, Louisiana, Florida, Oklahoma, and Kansas. KPM is run “under the auspices of the Archdiocese of San Antonio,” explains Johnston. Over 23,000 inmates from more than 90 prisons and other incarceration facilities have participated in over 500 retreats.

With prison facilities frequently located in out-of-the-way rural areas, finding volunteers can be tricky. Most “outside team” members are retirees available to serve on three-day retreats and/or post-retreat faith formation. Other volunteers include formerly incarcerated retreat alumni who have been released and are eager to serve.

In addition to “outside” volunteers, retreat alumni who are current inmates help facilitate events. Johnston remembers a moving retreat where a member of the “inside team” gave a talk on forgiveness accompanied by concrete action. An ex-Skinhead, he publicly knelt in front of the Black inmates to apologize for his past racism.

In addition to the consecration to the Sacred Heart and 250 hours of adoration, the U.S. bishops have encouraged the faithful to complete 250 Works of Mercy. Pope Leo XIV writes, “As we contemplate Christ’s love, ‘we too are inspired to be more attentive to the sufferings and needs of others, and confirmed

in our efforts to share in his work of liberation as instruments for the spread of his love” (*Dilexi te* 2). The seven corporal works of mercy are: feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, visit the imprisoned, care for the sick, and bury the dead.

Inmates have been inspiring KPM's work from the beginning. For example, Larry Reeh was serving on a Christian inter-denominational prison retreat led by Kairos Prison Ministry when an inmate mentioned having a powerful experience before his incarceration at a Catholic parish retreat known as the ACTS Retreat (Adoration, Community, Theology, and Service). The inmate suggested to Reeh that ACTS Retreats should be offered in prison.

"It burned in Larry's heart to do something," Johnston recounts. "ACTS Retreats are 100% Catholic, whereas Kairos ecumenical-type retreats had to leave out anything Catholic-oriented."

"Prison ACTS" held its first retreat in August 2009 at the John B. Connally Unit in Kenedy, Texas.

"After a few retreats, it became clearer that there are certain things, because of security and so on, that couldn't be done exactly in line with the ACTS Retreat requirements," explains Johnston. In 2015, Kolbe Prison Ministries was established as a separate organization.

KPM cannot proselytize, which would be against the policy of state departments of correction. "We cannot go in

there and overtly try to convince anybody else to become Catholic," Johnston says. "We just want to present our side."

Anti-Catholic misconceptions commonly circulate within prisons, so KPM provides an opportunity for those who are curious to learn about the sacraments and have their questions addressed. On average, each retreat includes 30-66 retreatants. Many alumni have gone on to participate in OCIA (Order of Christian Initiation of Adults) to become baptized Catholics.

KPM strives to demonstrate God's love for each retreatant, some of whom Johnston says have shared that nobody has told them they're loveable in years.

### Change of Heart

Daniel Reyes had an aversion to anything prison-related. He had been brought up with the notion that "only bad people had tattoos," and whenever he read a list of the Corporal Works of Mercy at Lent, he always "leapfrogged over" visiting the imprisoned.

Once Reyes retired in 2017, one of his ACTS Retreat brothers encouraged him to give prison ministry a chance. Reyes agreed despite initial hesitation. In September 2018, he served on KPM's first retreat at Allen Correctional Center in Kinder, Louisiana — the ministry's first-ever expansion outside Texas.

Joining the ministry "changed my heart," says Reyes, who is now a KPM board of directors member and leads the Core Team Committee.

The Lake Charles Core Team in Louisiana facilitates a unique event at Allen Correctional Center known as "Renew," a Wednesday night Catholic group for former retreatants where "inside" volunteers provide Bible reflections from the perspective

of the imprisoned. At Renew, Reyes grew in friendship with an inmate who had tattoos, learning to see deeper than the exterior and appreciate his goodness.

When the man's parole hearing arrived, KPM volunteers testified on his behalf. Upon his release, a group was waiting at 12:01 a.m. to welcome him into freedom. Another KPM member gave him a job. And when Reyes learned the man's dream was to join the Knights of Columbus, Reyes and his pastor — a KPM chaplain — helped make it happen.

Today, not only is this individual excelling in his career, he is also a Fourth Degree Knight.

Speaking of the volunteering experience, Reyes says, "[The inmates] have no clue how much our relationship with them changes us."

"When we drive away, we're just thinking about how a conversation, or how listening to someone tell their story and how the retreat changed them, just warms our hearts," he adds. "They probably do more for us than we do for them, is what we say." ■

### FIND OUT MORE ABOUT KOLBE PRISON MINISTRIES:

- To volunteer or donate, please visit <https://kolbeprisonministries.org/support-us/>
- KPM is holding its 11th annual conference July 25, 2026, at St. Paul Catholic Community Center in San Antonio, Texas. Guest speakers include Auxiliary Bishop Gary Janak of the Archdiocese of San Antonio, EWTN Live host Father Mitch Pacwa, and more. The event is open to the public. Please visit <https://kolbeprisonministries.org/> to register.



**Top:** Monsignor Daniel Torres giving a talk on the sacraments during a KPM retreat.

**Bottom:** KPM retreat group photo. (All photos submitted)