

Grace Behind the Walls:

Diocese of Alexandria Hosts Inaugural Kolbe Prison Ministry Retreat at Raymond Laborde Correctional Center

by Kenneth McMullen
Deacon Candidate for the
Diocese of Alexandria

There is a passage in the Gospel of Matthew that cuts straight to the heart of every Catholic who has ever wondered what it truly means to love one's neighbor. "I was in prison and you came to visit me." (Matthew 25:36) For seventy men representing four dioceses and approximately twenty Catholic Church parishes across Louisiana, those words were not merely read — they were lived. In a landmark moment for the Diocese of Alexandria, the first ever Kolbe Prison Ministry (KPM) Retreat was conducted last month on August 13, 14, and 15 at Raymond Laborde Correctional Center in Cottonport, Louisiana — a facility that houses over 1,900 inmates. Sixty of those inmates were chosen as retreatants for the powerful three-day experience, and by all accounts, the Holy Spirit showed up in ways that words can barely contain.

The retreat takes its name and inspiration from St. Maximilian Kolbe, the Polish Franciscan priest who was imprisoned at Auschwitz during World War II. In July 1941, after a prisoner escaped, 10 men were selected to die by starvation. When one of the condemned men cried out for his wife and children, Father Kolbe



UDIOCESE'S FIRST KOLBE PRISON MINISTRY RETREAT. The retreat was held Aug. 13-14. Pictured: group photo of retreatants and retreat facilitators at Raymond Laborde Correctional Center in Cottonport, LA.

volunteered to take his place. He ultimately gave his life for another prisoner and was canonized by Pope St. John Paul II in 1982 as a martyr of charity.

KPM's mission statement is "to share the agape love of Jesus Christ with the incarcerated and to teach the fullness of the truth of the Catholic Church to them." Kolbe Retreats offer a transformative, faith-based experience for incarcerated individuals, designed to bring the healing love of Christ into the lives of participants through prayer, Bible study,

personal reflection, and group discussions. Since 2009, Kolbe Prison Ministries has been working with those incarcerated to help them heal and grow in their faith. The retreats facilitate to enrich and reinvigorate the spiritual lives of thousands of inmates throughout Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Louisiana, Florida, and Mississippi (2027).

A Historic First for the Diocese of Alexandria

With the blessing and approval of Bishop Robert

Marshall, Kolbe Prison Ministries was welcomed into the Diocese of Alexandria for the very first time. The Diocese of Lake Charles, already experienced in Kolbe retreats, graciously missioned the Diocese of Alexandria — passing the torch of this sacred work to a new diocese eager to serve. Leading the retreat was Director Kirk Quinn, joined by Co-Directors Dennis Fontenot, Lancey Silver, Robert Mathews, and Kenneth McMullen — men whose dedication to this mission reflects the very spirit of St. Maximilian Kolbe himself. Serving as the Spiritual Director was Father Charlie Ray, pastor of St. Mary's Assumption Church in Cottonport — a shepherd who knows his community and carried that pastoral love directly into the walls of Raymond Laborde.

What Happens on a Kolbe Retreat?

The purpose of a Kolbe Catholic retreat is to educate those with no knowledge of the faith, as well as re-energize Catholic retreatants to help them become or recommit as Christ's disciples. The retreat is filled with the graces and mysteries of the faith, interspersed with time for meaningful discussions as members of the presenting team gave witness talks. Retreatants begin a transformation as they

recognize their status as children of a God who loves them no matter what they have done — something easy for prisoners to forget, since incarceration tends to prompt feelings of marginalization and insignificance. The Kolbe team strives to expose the retreatants to kindness, love, and acceptance. Volunteers play a crucial role in facilitating the retreats, helping inmates experience spiritual renewal, forgiveness, and a deeper connection to their faith — fostering an environment of personal growth and redemption, empowering inmates to turn their lives around through God's grace. Many of the inmates experience a transformation of heart inspired by the ministry they receive and begin to make a positive change in their lives.

Answering Christ's Call

In a world that is quick to write off those who have failed, the Church stands apart — proclaiming loudly and lovingly that no soul is beyond the reach of God's mercy. The sixty men who walked into Grace Chapel at Raymond Laborde did not encounter an institution. They encountered a Church — alive, present, and unashamed. And the seventy men who gave their time, treasure, and witness left as changed as those they came to serve. Volunteers often experience personal growth, spiritual enrichment, and a deeper understanding of their faith through their involvement in Kolbe Retreats — as serving others in this capacity fosters compassion, empathy, and a sense of fulfillment as they help incarcerated individuals experience Christ's healing. Below are comments received from two different team members illustrating how they were impacted on this retreat:

"Those three days at Grace Chapel at Raymond Laborde Correctional Center were absolutely astonishingly beautiful. So many beautiful acts of love. This retreat did so much for me. I will not forget that weekend."
— SKL#1 Team Member

Continued on next page.

*The vineyard
of the Lord
is the house
of Israel.*

Isaiah 5:7
Responsorial Psalm
for October 4
Twenty-seventh Sunday
in Ordinary Time



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Continued from page 4:

“Last weekend was one of the most humbling experiences of my life. I can honestly say that after sitting with these guys for three days, listening to their stories, laughing with them, crying with them, praying together – I walked away changed. What an amazing three days. I went there hoping to bring Christ into that prison, but I left realizing that Christ was already there – and I encountered Him in some of the people I least expected.”

– SKL#1 Team Member

What is next?

Those words are not simply a suggestion for a select few. They are part of Christ’s call to His Church to recognize His presence in every human person, including

those who are incarcerated. While imprisonment carries real consequences for actions committed, the dignity of the human person remains. No prison wall can place someone beyond the reach of the mercy of God.

Plans are already underway for the second Kolbe Prison Ministry Retreat at Raymond Laborde Correctional Center in February 2027. Men interested in serving on the next retreat team are encouraged to consider answering this unique call to ministry. Opportunities also exist for individuals, parish organizations, and others who would like to support the ministry through prayer and donations. Please send an email to Kolbepr.m.alex@gmail.com or call Kenneth McMullen at 318-613-8714.

May the seeds planted during these three days continue to bear

fruit in the lives of the retreatants, their families, the volunteers who served them, and throughout the Diocese of Alexandria.

**St. Maximilian Kolbe,
pray for us.**

*Kenneth McMullen is a
Deacon Candidate for the
Diocese of Alexandria. He is
a retired medical professional
and he and his family live in
Cottonport, LA.*





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