



# THE MORAL IMPERATIVE TO END SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

## Survivors and Faith Leaders Speak Out

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Solitary confinement is often defined as the practice of isolating incarcerated people in closed cells for 22-24 hours a day with minimum human contact for periods of time ranging from days to decades.<sup>1</sup> Extensive research has shown that solitary confinement can have traumatic effects on the brain, causing hallucinations, panic attacks, paranoia, depression, and a litany of other psychological and physical problems.<sup>2</sup> In 2011 the United Nations stated that forced social isolation in excess of 15 days often rises to the level of torture,<sup>3</sup> yet a 2019 report by JSRI, Solitary Watch, and the ACLU of Louisiana found that 77 percent of persons held in solitary confinement in Louisiana had been there for more than a year, and 30 percent for more than five years.<sup>4</sup>

The Vera Institute for Justice found that in 2016 Louisiana prisons used solitary confinement at nearly **four** times the national rate.<sup>5</sup> In a nation-wide survey of state systems of corrections' use of restrictive housing in 2019, data provided by the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections indicate a dramatic decrease in the use of solitary confinement in Louisiana prisons. Nevertheless, the state still exceeds the national average of percentage of prisoners in restrictive housing by 26 percent.<sup>6</sup>

Because of the profound immorality of solitary confinement, the Louisiana Stop Solitary Coalition (LSSC) hosted a panel discussion of solitary survivors and faith leaders on September 23<sup>rd</sup> and asked them to articulate moral and ethical arguments for ending solitary confinement. What follows are highlights from that discussion.<sup>7</sup>

### The Immorality of Solitary Confinement

Several panelists spoke to why they believe solitary confinement is immoral, including Albert Woodfox, who was held in solitary at Louisiana State Prison (Angola) for 44 years and 10 months. He explained, "The most immoral aspect is that it is anti-humanity. It serves no penological purpose." Prisoners are placed in solitary for arbitrary reasons, such as "rebelling against being treated a certain way, talked to a certain way..." He concluded, "The sole purpose of solitary confinement is to break the human spirit."

Consuela Gaines is the Chapter Organizer for VOTE in the Lafayette region. Two of the 22 years that Ms. Gaines spent in prison were in solitary confinement, which proved to be a time of intense suffering. "I had some really, really hard times while in solitary confinement. I can remember it like it was yesterday. I had suicidal thoughts. It really played on me mentally..."

There were moments when I struggled with my [Islamic] faith. I questioned God a lot.” This suffering led Ms. Gaines to the following realization: “To be deprived of being able to be around other humans—that’s not normal. That is cruel. God did not create us to exist that way. He created us to interact with other human beings.”

## Moral Arguments to End Solitary

Rabbi Katie Bauman serves as the Senior Rabbi at Touro Synagogue in New Orleans and was the moderator for the event. She began the discussion by articulating a basic tenet of the Jewish faith: “[W]e are made in the image and likeness of God, and that really should inform how we interact with every single person. When I look at our faith more broadly, I see and hear the call of prophets and God’s insistence that society’s treatment of the most vulnerable is the barometer of the character of that society.”

Bishop Shelton J. Fabre heads the Catholic Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux, Louisiana, and chairs the USCCB Ad-Hoc Sub-Committee against Racism. In his opening remarks, Bishop Fabre articulated the seven principles of Catholic Social Teaching, which he described as “a rich tradition of wisdom that calls each person to build a just society.” Bishop Fabre noted that the first principle that undergirds the rest—the need to respect the life and dignity of each person—as well as the principle of solidarity are especially germane to ending solitary confinement. He reminded viewers that in 2014 Pope Francis decried extreme forms of isolation, calling them torture.

## Role of Faith Communities in Ending Solitary Confinement

Panelists were asked how faith communities can help abolish solitary confinement. Said Ms. Gaines, “Religious communities have great influence.... The object of the criminal justice system is to make everyone safer... but solitary confinement does not make us safer. ...If we can learn from spiritual leaders the harm of it, we can begin to have these conversations.”

At their 2019 annual assembly, Louisiana Interchurch Conference (LIC) leaders unanimously passed a resolution urging state leaders to “invest in humane and effective alternatives to solitary confinement” and for Louisiana to “continue to take action to end prolonged solitary confinement in our prisons and jails.”<sup>8</sup> Panel member Rev. Dan Krutz, an Episcopal priest and Executive Director of LIC, made the following observation:

“So many times people of faith think that if they believe the right thing they have done the job. People of faith need to see that our faith really comes alive when we put it to work. This area of criminal justice is prime for that. When I think about my own tradition, of people being in prison and being visited and cared for. It is reminding people that it is a part of our heritage and we need to live it now in the current moment of our lives. That this is a precious moment to act.”

## Conclusion

Pope Francis’ social encyclical on the need for fraternity and social friendship in today’s fractured world, *Fratelli Tutti*, was released ten days after the LSCC panel discussion. In this document Pope Francis describes what I believe are additional compelling reasons why solitary confinement should be banned:

“Human beings are so made that they cannot live, develop, and find fulfillment except in the sincere gift of self to others. Nor can they fully know themselves apart from an encounter with other persons... No one can experience the true beauty of life without relating to others, without having real faces to love. This is part of the mystery of authentic human existence. Life exists where there is bonding, community, and fraternity.”<sup>9</sup>

Let’s work together to end the inhumanity of solitary confinement and build a world where no incarcerated person is denied the right to authentic human existence through meaningful social interactions with others. A first step for people of faith in Louisiana is to sign a petition calling upon state leaders to end the use of solitary confinement at <https://tinyurl.com/LSSCsign>.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Rodriguez, S. (2015). Solitary confinement in the United States: SAQ. *Solitary Watch*. At <https://solitarywatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Solitary-Confinement-FAQ-2015.pdf>.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 (2011, October 18). “Solitary confinement should be banned in most cases, UN expert says.” At <https://news.un.org/en/story/2011/10/392012-solitary-confinement-should-be-banned-most-cases-un-expert-says>.
- 4 Quandt, R., Casella, J., Gilbert, A., Kiebal, V., Manson, J., & Weishar, S. (2019). *Louisiana on lockdown: A report on the use of solitary confinement in Louisiana state prisons, with testimony from the people who live it*. Solitary Watch, American Civil Liberties Union of Louisiana, Jesuit Social Research Institute/Loyola University New Orleans at <https://solitarywatch.org/louisianaonlockdown/>.
- 5 Cloud, D., LaChance, J., Smith, L., & Lalarza, L. (2019). *The safe alternatives to segregation initiative: Findings and recommendations for the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections, and progress toward implementation*. Vera Institute for Justice. At <https://www.vera.org/downloads/publications/safe-alternatives-segregation-initiative-findings-recommendations-ldps.pdf>.
- 6 (2020, September). *Time-In-Cell 2019: A Snapshot of Restrictive Housing Based on a Nationwide Survey of U.S. Prison Systems*. The Correctional Leaders Association & The Arthur Liman Center for Public Interest Law at Yale Law School. At [https://law.yale.edu/sites/default/files/area/center/liman/document/time-in-cell\\_2019.pdf](https://law.yale.edu/sites/default/files/area/center/liman/document/time-in-cell_2019.pdf) A troubling find in this report is that 7.3 percent of the men held in restrictive housing in Louisiana were diagnosed as severely mentally ill (SMI), in contrast to the nation-wide average of 4 percent. Unfortunately, women prisoners in restrictive housing in Louisiana were not counted in this report.
- 7 Remarks have been edited for brevity and clarity. The entire discussion, including compelling insights from panelists Rev. Ron Stief, Executive Director of the National Religious Coalition Against Torture, and Ben Wortham, Senior Director of Health Integration at Catholic Charities USA, may be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AQDmlmV7yAc>
- 8 (2019, March). *Resolution of the Louisiana Interchurch Conference on solitary confinement in Louisiana prisons and jails.*, LIC Annual Assembly, March 2019. At <http://www.lainterchurch.org/documents/ResolutionOnSolitaryConfinement-PassedAtAA2019.pdf>.
- 9 Pope Francis. (2020, October 3). *Fratelli Tutti: On fraternity and social friendship*. At [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201003\\_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html).