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"Sister G" — The Secret Weapon

"Can I go to prison with you?"

Linda Strom says, "I had just finished teaching at St. James Catholic prayer group in Mequon, Wisconsin, when a beautiful nun in her sixties approached me. 'I work at the Milwaukee County Jail every day,' she continued, 'so I already know a lot of the inmates.'"



Little did I expect that with that request nearly 20 years ago, I'd find a soul mate and role model. Sister Giselda Fenech, of the Sisters of Charity of St. Joan Antida, is a free-spirited, loving, vulnerable, and outspoken 80-year-old bundle of energy. She is from the island of Malta. My favorite Sister Giselda quote is,

"I didn't find Jesus in the convent, I didn't find Him in the church. I found Him in the jail. When I went into that jail and saw how the Lord works behind the bars I began to find the Lord in my own life."

She always loved God and the church, but in her heart of hearts she knew there was a missing link. Over the years she had allowed anger and bitterness to build up. Alcoholism was an unwelcome visitor in Sister's family of origin, as it had been in mine. She experienced terrible pain in World War II when she worked as a registered nurse in a hospital in Malta caring for young American and British soldiers.

A Turning Point

But working at the Burn Center at St. Mary's Hospital in Milwaukee put Sister over the edge. Returning from her brother's funeral, she learned that two of her burn patients that she was very close to had died. Sister says, "I was losing it, and Mother Superior didn't know what else to do with me—so they transferred me to the jail. That was the best thing that ever happened to me."

I remember Sister's response to one reporter asking her, "What about jailhouse religion?" She asked him for to clarify his question. "You know," he said, "inmates who say they want God because they're in trouble. As soon as they get out, they forget all about God." Sister G is only four feet, ten inches tall. But sometimes she seems six feet tall as this reporter soon discovered. Dressed in her gray habit and well-worn tennis shoes, she

walked right up to him, straightened her shoulders and replied rather indignantly, "Why, that's God's business, not mine. I sow the seed and let the Lord deal with it from there."

Sister G in [Gatesville](#)

While in Gatesville's Mountain View prison one weekend, Sister G connected with Sherry, an aloof and unkempt inmate. When we divided into small groups at the end of the service, Sherry distanced herself from the others. Sister G, like the hound of heaven, pursued her. Finally Sherry, realizing she wasn't going to ditch Sister G, opened up to her.

She asked Sister G, "If you had a dirty, ugly old house and Jesus came to your door, would you let Him in?" As always, Sister G had just the right reply. "Why, Sherry. I would. You see, He has a broom and all the cleaning utensils. He just wants to clean up your house!"

As I watched Sister G loving Sherry that weekend, it deeply touched me. **This is You, Jesus. Loving people. They responded to You, and You set them free.**

In the video [Karla Faye Tucker](#) and I made two weeks before her execution, Karla laughed as she talked about Sister G. "Sweet, sweet Sister Giselda. The way she becomes a mother to everyone she meets in prison—she brings so much joy." Then Karla gave one of her perky smiles and announced, "Sister G just knows how to hug." And if saying it once wasn't enough, she said again, emphasizing the depth of Sister G's hug. "She can really huggg!"



To me, the prerequisite for discipleship is love. Jesus said people would know us by our love. The most important question any of us should ask before entering any ministry is, "Can I love people?" It's that love that melts the heart of stone.

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Discipleship Unlimited

Linda and Dallas Strom
Box 170423
Milwaukee, WI 53217-0423



www.LifeRow.org

Email us at LindaStrom@LifeRow.org.

If you notice problems with this web site,

Phone: (262) 790-1793
Fax: (262) 790-1827

please contact the [webmaster](#).

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