

Kelly Gissendaner, prison theology studies graduate, executed in Georgia

by [Celeste Kennel-Shank](#) in the [October 28, 2015](#) issue

Despite pleas by Pope Francis, theologian Jürgen Moltmann, pastors, professors, and fellow inmates, Kelly Renee Gissendaner, 47, was executed by the state of Georgia on September 30.

Gissendaner had been convicted of conspiring with her then-boyfriend, who killed her husband, Douglas Gissendaner, in 1997.

“I will never understand how I let myself fall into such evil, but I have learned first-hand that no one, not even me, is beyond redemption through God’s grace and mercy,” she wrote in her clemency application, as quoted by the *Huffington Post*.

The Georgia Board of Pardons and Paroles and the U.S. Supreme Court had denied appeals for clemency from Gissendaner’s attorneys as late as the day before the execution.

Gissendaner had earned a certificate in 2011 from a theological studies program run by the Atlanta Theological Association.

“She was full of joy and gratitude and also had this courageous ability to face what she had done,” said [Jennifer McBride, who directed the program at that time](#).

McBride went to the lockdown unit after Gissendaner was no longer allowed to leave solitary confinement for classes.

“We were talking about these most important questions about God and ourselves,” she said. “There’s something pretty powerful about talking about these things through the bars.”

McBride’s class read portions of Moltmann’s books *The Source of Life* and *Theology of Hope*. With McBride’s encouragement, Gissendaner began corresponding with Moltmann, who was a prisoner of war in World War II. They met when he visited Atlanta.

“She and I and Jürgen had a couple-hour pastoral visit together,” McBride said. “They talked about how they both had this awakening toward God and faith” in prison.

For McBride, “the coming together of the only woman on Georgia’s death row and this world-renowned theologian” displayed the “beauty of beloved community.”

McBride, now professor of religion at Wartburg College in Iowa, continued to visit Gissendaner in prison until a few days before Gissendaner’s death.

“One of the last things that I said to her,” McBride said, was “about Jesus’ parable in Matthew and how he says, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant.’ I think those are some of the first words she’s going to hear from God.”

Among others who have shared stories about Gissendaner’s effect on their lives have been those incarcerated with her, including a group called the Struggle Sisters.

Kara Tragesser, a member of the Struggle Sisters who works at the Mercy Junction Justice and Peace Center in Chattanooga, Tennessee, [wrote on Mercy Junction’s blog](#) about Gissendaner: “She found transformation, she bloomed in a place where there is no sunshine, no love, no nurture—no one except the very real God in whom she placed all of her trust.”

*This article was edited on October 12, 2015.*