

# The Prison of Father Gordon MacRae and Pornchai Maximilian Moontri

Rebecca Virelles

*(This story originally appeared on [Beyond These Stone Walls](#))*

Before you read about the two men named above, please know they are real people, living at the time of this writing, who are dear to many on earth and in heaven. Though you may never meet them in this life, please extend mercy with your heart and read their stories carefully.

## Historical Context

Father Gordon MacRae is an American priest who is currently serving up to 67 years in prison. He was wrongly convicted of sexual assault in 1994. At the time of this writing, he has spent 32 years in prison for crimes for which he is wholly innocent, crimes that never took place. Because Father MacRae maintains his innocence, he will never receive parole and thus will serve the full 67 years, a life sentence, unless some other intervention materializes.

## The Evidence

In 2005 and 2013, Dorothy Rabinowitz, an award-winning journalist wrote multiple [articles for The Wall Street Journal](#) covering this egregious injustice: "Trials of Father MacRae" (2013), "A Priest's Story" (2005). Dorothy Rabinowitz was awarded the Pulitzer Prize and the "Champion of Justice Award" from the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers.

In 2022, Boston criminal justice and civil rights Attorney Harvey Silverglate also wrote for The Wall Street Journal in "[Justice Delayed for Father MacRae.](#)" His article revealed new

information which came to light about the “falsification of records” of the lead detective behind Father MacRae’s case, James F. McLaughlin.

Additionally, a post-trial investigation by former F.B.I. Investigator James Abbott revealed that Detective McLaughlin threatened a defense witness, a therapist, with arrest if she did not change her testimony which would have helped to exonerate Father MacRae. The therapist had planned to testify that the accuser, Thomas Grover, had never accused MacRae of anything, though he accused several others of sexual abuse. This would have weakened McLaughlin’s case. She stated, “McLaughlin told me he would personally come to my home, drag me out of it bodily if necessary, and force me to appear in court and testify despite my information to him.” Her statement is here: [Statement of Debra Collett](#).

Here is an excerpt of a letter dated October 24, 2013 by a media official for PBS to Judge Arthur Brennan, who sentenced Father MacRae to prison:

*“My wife, Penny, and I were present in the courtroom throughout most of the trial of Fr. Gordon MacRae. For all these years, I have had many questions about this trial and much that I’ve wanted to clarify for my own peace of mind. I learned recently that both a superior court judge here in New Hampshire and the NH Supreme Court declined to hold a hearing on the evidence and merits of a habeas corpus petition in this case. Now that state courts seem no longer to be involved, I feel more inclined to approach you on what has been bothering me, as you were the presiding judge.*

*“We saw something in your courtroom during the MacRae trial that I don’t think you ever saw. My wife nudged me and pointed to a woman, Ms. Pauline Goupil [now Pauline Vachon], who was engaged in what appeared to be clear witness tampering. During questioning by the defense attorney, Thomas Grover seemed to feel trapped a few times. On some of those*

*occasions, we witnessed Pauline Goupil make a distinct sad expression with a downturned mouth and gesturing with her finger from the corner of her eye down her cheek at which point Mr. Grover would begin to cry and sob on the stand. The lawyer's questions were never answered.*

*"I have been troubled about this for all these years. I know what I saw, and what I saw was a clear attempt to dupe the court and the jury. If the sobbing and crying was not truthful, then I cannot help but wonder what else was not truthful on the part of Mr. Grover. If he was really a victim who wanted to tell the simple truth, why was it necessary for him and Ms. Goupil to have what clearly appeared to be a set of prearranged signals to alter his testimony? The jury was privy to none of this, to the best of my knowledge.*

*"Signed, Leo Demers"*

His full statement is here: [Statement of Leo Demers](#).

Here is an excerpt of a statement by Steven Wollschlager on October 27, 2008:

*"McLaughlin asked me many times if Gordon ever tried to come onto me sexually or offered me money for any sexual favors. He had me believing that all I had to do was make up a story about Gordon and I could receive a large sum of money as others already had. McLaughlin reminded me of the young child and girlfriend I had and referenced that life could be easier for us with a large amount of money [...] I was at the time using drugs and could have been influenced to say anything they wanted for money.*

*"A short time later after being subpoenaed to Court, I had a different feeling about the situation. I did not want to lie or make up stories. After speaking with the Clerk of Courts I was approached by another person. After telling this person that I did not want to be there and I stated Gordon had never*

*done anything wrong towards me sexually or otherwise. I was told I could leave. This person seemed visibly upset that I had nothing to say.”*

His full statement is linked: [Statement of Steven Wollschlager](#).

The last to make a statement in support of Father MacRae’s innocence whom I will mention is Charles Glenn, Thomas Grover’s former stepson. An excerpt of his signed statement reads as follows:

*“From 1993 to 1997 I was assigned to the Youth Development Center in Manchester, New Hampshire. During this period, my mother Trina Ghedoni was dating and later married to Thomas Grover. Almost every week my mother would visit me with Thomas Grover and on numerous weekends I would receive a furlough and be allowed to go to my home at 410 Prescott St. in Manchester where my mother and Thomas Grover lived.*

*“During these visits, and over a number of months and years, Thomas Grover discussed the sex abuse allegations against Gordon MacRae with me. Grover often stated to me that he was going to set MacRae and the church up to gain money for sexual abuse. Grover would laugh and joke about this scheme and after the criminal trial and civil cash award he would again state how he had succeeded in this plot to get cash from the church. On several occasions Thomas Grover told me that he had never been molested by MacRae.”*

His full statement is here: [Statement of Charles Glenn](#).

These statements are not the only evidence of wrongdoing, manipulation, and fraud in the case against Father Gordon MacRae, however for the sake of brevity I will conclude with linking Father MacRae’s own synopsis of the case against him: [Synopsis of the Case](#).

## Where To From Here?

Now that we have covered this injustice, we can turn our attention to what Father MacRae has done with his time and talents within those stone walls. He has successfully encouraged many prisoners to seek and complete higher education, and he has helped multiple prisoners prepare for deportation to countries where they had few or no connections or means of assistance. Some of the best work Father Gordon MacRae has done is not material: he has cooperated with the Holy Spirit to bring people, in and outside of prison, to hope and to God despite what they have endured or what they have done. Pornchai Max Moontri, one of Father MacRae's closest friends, and a free man now living in Thailand, says of him:

*“Father Gordon MacRae freed me from the evil inflicted on me. He taught me that this evil is not mine to keep. What do I do with such a story? If Father G had not been here, what would have become of me? He freed my mind and soul from the horror inflicted by a real predator. It breaks my heart that the man responsible for my freedom will now be left behind in prison.” – Statement of Pornchai Maximilian Moontri in a post written from Thailand: [“On the Day of Padre Pio, My Best Friend Was Stigmatized.”](#)*

Father MacRae has a blog, [Beyond These Stone Walls](#), in which he posts weekly reflections about Faith, Science, current events, and updates on the lives of his friends. Two of my favorites of his posts are: [Science and Faith Are Not Mutually Incompatible](#) and [In the Absence of Fathers: A Story of Elephants and Men](#).

Here is a link to a post written on September 26, 2018, about his friend Pornchai Max titled: [Pornchai Moontri: Bangkok to Bangor, Survivor of the Night](#).

**My Analysis: Finding Light in the Dark**

**“As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.” – Joseph to his brothers who sold him into slavery, Genesis 50:20**

The purpose of this essay is to share the literature and lives of those who chose freedom of the soul over physical freedom. Other lives I have recounted and written about were courageous for facing death, but it is inspiring to see two people not give up after so much injustice and years of confinement. It is also wonderful to see how the effects of this hope have spread to others. At the end of Pornchai Max's sentence in 2020, he faced five months in ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) detention and deportation to a land he had not seen or spoken the language of for many years. This was due to Richard Bailey's meaningful choice not to allow Pornchai Max's mother (Wanee) to apply for U.S. citizenship, as he knew it helped him to keep a higher control of the mother and sons. It is likely Bailey threatened Wanee that if she did not do what he said that she would be deported to Thailand without means or assistance, as this was one of the reasons Wanee pleaded with Pornchai Max not to testify against his stepfather, Bailey.

However, what man intended for evil, God used for good. Thanks to Divine Providence, Beyond These Stone Walls readers, the “bridge” Father MacRae and Pornchai Max built, and the hard work and faithfulness of Pornchai Max in meeting these challenges, he was able to find housing and meaningful employment. He now lives in Thailand and volunteers to help those less fortunate. If Father Gordon MacRae had taken the lenient plea deals offered to him, he would not have met him and Pornchai Max would likely have never seen any measure of justice for what he endured.

**“ ‘Behold, I make all things new.’ ” – Revelation 21:5**

Pornchai Max's triumph over the past is also evidenced by his

accomplishments: earning his diploma and graduating as class Valedictorian in 2012, completing social work and psychology academic certificates at Stratford Career Institute “with highest honors”, and completing Theology courses at Catholic Distance University through a scholarship with all “A’s”. The late Clare Dion, who interviewed, visited, and befriended Pornchai Max during his imprisonment wrote, “What Pornchai has accomplished is nothing short of amazing given that he learned English in prison. He and ‘Father G’ encourage other prisoners to become educated, and Pornchai spent time mentoring and tutoring them, especially in mathematics in which he excels. He also spent his days in the woodworking and Hobby Craft shop where he taught safety training to other prisoners on the use of carpentry tools and machines.”

## **Testimony**

A recent comment on the [“Book of Tobit: The Angel Raphael on the Road with Pornchai Moontri”](#) reads:

*“What a beautiful faith-filled story! What left me with goosebumps is the fact that I know that every word of it is true. I have known Father Gordon and Max for many years. I was a lost 17-year-old when I was sent to prison, and I spent many years in hopelessness before meeting these two incredible guys. Though I walked through the valley of the shadow of death, they were at my side bringing light to my very dark journey. I am a different person today because of them. I have wept over Max’s journey and the continued challenges he faced even in freedom. But Father G was there for him, even from a distance, and that is true of me as well. I also love dogs and this is the best dog story ever! I treasure you guys.*

*God bless you.*

*Bobby T”*

A comment on a different post reads:

*“WOW! I spent a couple of years in that prison. Because of overcrowding, there were no cells available for me. So I was stuck in an overflow bunk right outside cell #1 on Bravo Pod in Hancock Building. In time I came to see that I was the luckiest person in the world because the two prisoners living in cell #1 were Father G and Pornchai. When the gangs tried to recruit me, they weren't having it. When a predator tried to extort me, they sent him packing. I felt so exposed going to prison at a very young age that these two guys made me feel perfectly safe. They weren't taking any BS from me either. In exchange for looking after me, they made me go to school and I earned my high school diploma. That is a miracle because I have always been a dumbass. My worst enemy was Math, but Pornchai was a whiz at Math and got me through it. These two guys were seen by everyone as a team and I was fortunate enough to be their gatekeeper. I was popular by default. I have a lot of gratitude toward them both, and I thank them for their patience with me. I admire Pornchai so much more now to see that he is a man of deep faith. God bless them both.*

*With love from Ralph”*

According to [“Mercy Inside These Stone Walls,”](#) a chapter in a book by Felix Carroll, fellow inmate, Donald Spinner, a Catholic convert, says his faith took root through Pornchai's example. “Pornchai, especially, has influenced so many people here,” he says. “We all expect Father G. to be a good person, but Pornchai's life of grace is inspiring to everyone. ... The cost of discipleship for me has been the loss of my selfishness. No one can be selfish in such company.”

## **Conclusion**

Evil and injustice are the hardest things to grapple with, especially as we witness our own struggles with light and dark. As others have written before, in our lives we cannot control the evil that happens to us, but we do always have the

choice in how we respond. Even after meeting Father Gordon, Pornchai Maximilian could have chosen not to trust in him – he had every reason not to. Yet his courage and hope in setting aside the past propelled him forward, to freedom and to seeing some measure of justice served. Father Gordon could have chosen the easy way out, yet he would not have touched many lives, as several of the comments on his posts attest.

In an echo of one of his writings quoting St. Padre Pio: We often do not see how things are being woven together in God's tapestry; we only see what looks like a tangled mess on the back. Yet, if we trust and do our part, even in the dark, even in pain, we will do what is right and one day understand it all. That is the essence of choosing the freedom of your soul over convenience, over your family, even over your life. True freedom comes from choosing to do the right thing, the will of God written on our hearts, and returning to it again when we stumble and fall. Our lives look different in the light of eternity.

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