

Come Inside

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of the Community of the Resurrection

SEEN FROM the railway, Wormwood Scrubs looks what it is—a prison—an indeterminate mass of grey wall within grey wall. Approached on foot, the great entrance fascinates the more adventurous with its “Come-hither-if-you-dare” look. It resembles something between a permanent set for a large scale German production of Macbeth and the main gate of a metropolitan Spanish bull ring. This theatrical view is denied the convicted prisoner, for he is driven up to the doors in a van designed rather for interior contemplation than for the study of the London scene. His first sight of the prison is from within, where, if any poetry remains in him, he may imagine himself in a monastery garden, well stocked with roses and enclosed by the great romanesque church (centre back-cloth) and tall rococo cloisters which lead to the offices and connect with the first of two large halls on either side. These four halls are identical and look for all the world like full scale models for King’s College Chapel at Cambridge before the invention of glass walls. There are windows, of course, designed rather for breath-

ing through than for looking at (or through) and if you can count them all up on one side of a hall and multiply by eight you will know how many cells there are altogether. Double that number and you will know roughly the number of inhabitants for, though the cells are identical and most are occupied by one person, a large minority have three occupants.

The first time I found myself within the cloistered *plaza*, nervously fingering my sermon notes (some five years ago), there was a clear Spanish sky above and I said to myself, “This is the place for me: could I not find some way of doing time here without publicly disgracing my church, my family and friends, and at the same time attempt some reparation for an ill-spent but officially undetected past?” A second visit confirmed to my conscience the need for discipline, and was largely instrumental in precipitating my application for a life sentence in Mirfield. It was therefore with mingled pleasure and apprehension that I looked forward to the mission on which I was to accompany the Superior, Brother Jeremy and Father Medwyn

Griffiths. What the Governor and his chiefs of staff were expecting from us, who can tell? But they had sufficient confidence in the Chaplain, Fr. Derek Tyrie, for it to be extended to us in a very kind welcome and the promise of every co-operation.

We were each allotted a hall as our major pastoral responsibility. The Superior and Brother Jeremy were given the overcrowded halls of the adults—mostly long-term and life sentences. The junior halls housed a more mobile population of boys awaiting suitable accommodation at borstals, Fr. Medwyn and I therefore were able to have a cell each in which to sleep and keep our things. The boys were intrigued by the difficulty we had on explaining that our life in Mirfield was in fact more agreeable than theirs in the Scrubs: *Do you have a cell?* they would ask, *How big?* Rough measurements taken, *About a foot wider and a foot shorter than yours,* we would have to admit.

What have you got in it?

Much the same as you—chair, table, bed (sheets and all), some drawers and a mirror, but no wash stand.

Church parades? Every Sunday?

Every day, chum—seven times a day.

Good God! What were you sent in for?

What indeed! That was what was

so difficult to explain. It sounded smug to say that it was the life we had chosen, yet therein lay all the difference. No—not quite all; there was the matter of keys by which nothing in our life, but everything in theirs is regulated. They saw this—there in the halls, their cells were locked behind them whenever they went in, ours whenever we went out.

In each of the halls our main work was visiting in the cells—sometimes at the request of the occupant, otherwise from cell to cell as far as we were able to get round. The response varied in every case but I think none of us found himself made to feel unwelcome. How far these visitations had any more value than that of a change of face and conversation it is impossible to say, though we each had experiences that seemed to involve more than sheer superficiality.

In any military or kindred institution the matter of *voluntary church* is always a problem. With whatever good faith a man may come to church, he lays himself open to accusations of hypocrisy or of escaping some dirty chore. And however insistent the C.O. or Governor may be on encouragement being given, this so often reaches the rank and file in the form of *volunteers for church—you, you and you—NOT you!* However the co-operation of the

prison officers was generously given, even though as will happen in a military or bureaucratic system, things sometimes went wrong. Permission was given, for instance, that such boys as wished might come to the week-day Masses. This entailed some rather complex system of over-night notifications being handed over to the morning watch. Coming to this service meant getting up as soon as roused, "doing" the cell, being marched out into the cold before breakfast and risking getting back to find the porridge either cold or finished. One morning the officer, on this duty for the first time, was astonished to find so much activity so early—church? *Something MUST be wrong. Very well—first twenty, fall in—the rest, back to your cells.* Apart from this setback, the numbers at Mass grew daily: unadulterated 1662, but without sermon or music: no commentary except for the indication of the page in the B.C.P.: an electric atmosphere and the perfect answer to the question: *Was the mission a success? Did it do any good?* Yes. These early mornings did me a power of good.

Excessive zeal in co-operation could sometimes be an embarrassment. Boys will be boys, and policemen are policemen, church is church and clergymen are—well they must be protected. The watchful eyes of the warders at the first of the boys' mission services didn't

encourage the relaxed atmosphere that we wanted. The first sign of lively reaction which Fr. Medwyn was working for created some apprehension among the staff, but the burning eyes of the Welsh Father silently won the day and the rest of the week went with a swing.

There was nothing particularly voluntary about the Sunday mission services. We took over the normal parade services—500 boys at one, 500 men at the other—or rather the exact number to fill every seat in the church. The last of these was very memorable. After an opening hymn (and here I must mention that the church is blessed with a fine organ, a first class grand piano in tune with it and an organist ready for anything!) the Superior talked with his usual restrained, unemotional and lucid humour about prayer. He then sandwiched a poem between the next two hymns and handed us over to Brother Jeremy for some active praying. We had written to every religious community of the Church of England to ask for their intercessions for this week, and it was now, during 20 minutes of silence broken only by Brother Jeremy's courageously infrequent direction of intention, that one knew that these nuns were responding and felt that there was a wimple behind every man in the church that evening.

Gracias a Dios (Spanish). It did us a lot of good.