The Church and the Prisoner

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"PRIESTHOOD towards one another is the shouldering of necessary responsibility". It is with this definition of priesthood that the Prisons Commission of the Church Assembly begins its report on "The Church and the Prisoner". Our Lord is seen exercising his priesthood on the Cross—"there they crucified Him, and with Him, two others, one on the right hand, the other on the left, and Jesus between them". He was there to be the means whereby those between whom he hung could be restored to be the persons they might have been, and the way was by becoming the necessary neighbour.

It is to this acceptance of responsibility that we are all commanded.

Responsibility has first of all to be laid at the door of the offender himself, and we have to help the offender accept his responsibility and offer penitence for it, but the assessment of the degree of personal responsibility is a hard and delicate task, even when the offender is willing that it should be attempted. Many a man lays the blame for his wrongdoing and for all the trouble it brings to himself and others nowhere but upon himself. But this is not the complete picture—there is more to be said about responsibility than lies at this one man's door. He himself is not the only source of his own failure; he is the result of failure all round. "Each man and each woman in prison is a single separate piece of evidence that we have all let each other down, and somewhere, by someone, some reparation must be made."

There are about 29,000 of such pieces of evidence in our prisons and borstals at this moment—men and women drawn from every strata of society; some professional criminals, others enthusiastic amateurs, some backward and inadequate, others cultured and sensitive; some with resources upon which to draw, others despairing and confused. The State in expressing its priesthood, seeks not only to punish but to reclaim, so that the man can come out of prison a

stronger and more hopeful person —and accepts all the risks and pains involved in this process. Those who as members of the prison staff undertake this task on behalf of the rest of us are entitled to our prayers and support.

But the principal agent of the church's ministry to the men and women in prison is the chaplain. In every large prison there is a full time chaplain, in every small prison a part time chaplain. He is set in the prison to be what every priest is—a watchman, messenger and steward. What distinguishes his work is the context in which it has to be done—in "an enclosed community of men with no vocation to the religious life", as one writer has put it, among men most of whom have had little if any contact with the church—the life of the church is often as foreign to them as the life of the Athenaeum club—in a constantly changing community of men who have no roots in the situation which he shares with them.

Bruce Kendrick in his book describes how a group of theological students in New York reacted to the challenge of our Lord's command to "Go into all the world" and faced its implications for East Harlem, one of the world's most densely populated areas with 200,000 people jammed together in little over one square mile, an area with the highest rate in the city for T.B., V.D., infant mortality, rat bites and malnutrition—and beneath this, loneliness, division, fragmentation, race hatreds, violence and crime—a real wilderness in which the church was thought to be largely irrelevant. Faced with this challenge, the students saw that neither enthusiasm nor bright ideas nor compassion would be in themselves of much avail, the only way out was first of all to enter right into the heart of the East Harlem tensions, and from the position of physical involvement learn to be ministers of Christ. Acceptance of responsibility would have to be expressed in identification and involvement, in being at the disposal of the people with whom they sought to be identified.

There is a strong parallel here with the work of the church in prison. The prison chaplain has to go to people where they are, as they are. He lives among them and identifies himself with them. He sees every man on reception, visits men in cells, in hospital, and under punishment. He shares in their recreations, takes part in their counsels, joins in group activities, meets their families. In his pastoral work, the chaplain is there to offer friendship—for "often a man has to find a friend, then himself, before he can find God or be found by him". It is in the relationship of friendship that understanding on the part of the chaplain and confidence on the part of the prisoner, can begin. Each man has to be seen as something more than a number or a case or a problem or a criminal; each has to be approached as a separate individual with his own potential point of entry into the Kingdom. The chaplain has to

ask: "What is God's will for this man now and how am I to fit in?" Only then is the next step revealed to him.

We are often asked what response is there to the chaplain's work, what results are there to be seen? Well, there is first of all the undoubted response of affection, deep and overwhelming at times, lifelong friendships being forged at a time of deep crisis. There is the visible response of men being prepared for baptism and confirmation, confessions being made, instruction being sought and received, lapsed communicants returning, C.E.M.S.* branches flourishing, regular worship being offered. But we have no right to demand results—this is God's work and we are there at His disposal. I have always been helped by some words Father Stephen Bedale wrote to me when I was transferred to Dartmoor—"You are now going to struggle with some of the toughest of God's children. Be content to love them and pray for them and leave the rest to the Holy Spirit, it will be exciting to see how He gets to work".

But the chaplain is no more than an agent of the whole priestly body of the church, for what God seeks to do through his ministry he requires also to sustain and continue through the whole body of the church at large. "Where there is a thorn in the foot, the whole body must stoop down to pick it out."

While the man is in prison, the church is to exercise its responsibility by praying for him, and for those who have the care of him. The Guild of St. Leonard exists to encourage and organize this support. The Church Assembly has set up a Prison Chaplaincies Council to promote and assist the church in the dioceses, rural deaneries, and parishes in their efforts to give aid to chaplains or to prisoners during or after their terms of imprisonment. One of the first steps it took was to ask each diocesan bishop to appoint a diocesan representative who will seek to arouse among Christian people a sensitivity to the need and a concern for the work. Several religious communities as well as the Church Army conduct missions in prison, whilst theological students frequently come into borstals to spend a week or so living with the boys. Kelham students figure prominently in this adventure of identification, visiting institutions, not to take services but to come alongside the boys, to work with them and to play with them and to worship with them.

Prisoners occasionally go out during their sentence to worship and study with Christian groups outside and Christian groups from outside frequently share in worship and study inside, and thus reconciliation within the Body of Christ becomes a reality

Eventually, the prisoner comes out of prison. Some have helpful homes, good friends, good vicars, a job to go back to, or a new one to take up. But many just come out

*Church of England Men's Society.

into a question mark and a blank, and it is at this point that the church can do so much towards his help and recovery. Forgiveness has to be experienced within a forgiving community, accommodation needs to be provided, work has to be found, and even more necessary, friendship has to be given by people who are prepared to become involved at depth. Here patient, persevering, realistic responsibility has to be accepted—with all the inherent risks and disappointments. Olive Wyon once wrote: "If you are seeking to help a person, you must be prepared to swim out into the deep beyond the point at which you feel safe yourself, where only the power of God can hold you up". Nowhere is this more true than in the area of work among ex-prisoners. A great deal is being done in what is often a hidden ministry. Harry who was discharged four years ago into a sympathetic sensitive Christian group writes: "Last Christmas as my wife and I queued up for our Christmas communion I found myself standing alongside an ex-detective inspector also a Christian, and as we knelt down together at the altar I saw something of what the Church means".

The priesthood of Our Lord extends throughout the whole church, towards all men without favour or exception. In this we all have a share.

In France—Yesterday

PRISONERS in the Bastille were often kept in custody for periods of years far in excess of modern prison sentences. . so states an article by Herr Richard Brachwitz (a hospital officer in a Berlin prison) in a German medical journal. He instances how Isaac d'Arezot remained in prison for 54 years for forging a Royal pardon. Like many others he was insane for many of the years spent in conditions described by the notorious Marquis de Sade (in prison himself in 1785) as "hardly room to turn round". The marquis, who had severe nose bleedings, was eventually sent to a mental institution run by a monastic order.

Abraham Reilh, surgeon of the Bastille, whose duties seem to have been more those of a barber than a doctor, was promoted pharmacist. The records say "he distinguished himself by his great impertinence and ignorance".

The Patients of the Bastille, translated by Irmgard Lumb, may be borrowed from the Editor.