

The importance of a Pastoral Outreach to Prisoners Overseas

I've been invited to speak on the importance of a pastoral outreach to prisoners. It's a hugely important subject and one that goes to the very heart of what the ICPO is all about. However, the most I can do in the short time allowed is say something about what the term "pastoral outreach" means, and by commenting on the work of the ICPO alongside that of the prison chaplaincy, stress the importance of this work in a fast-changing and increasingly secular prison environment. Obviously, my experience is limited to working with prisoners and their families in England and Wales. The plight of prisoners in other countries is rendered more difficult by problems of distance, cultural and legal differences, etc., as we heard this morning from Pauline Crowe.

I remember having a brief altercation with a deputy prison governor on the subject of chaplaincy work and its pastoral dimension. He wanted to know what the word 'pastoral' meant. I was quite taken aback by the fact that someone in his position with presumably a good education and years of prison experience and with a good chaplaincy team in his prison could ask such a question. It brought home to me that not everyone understands the language we use in relation to the wellbeing of prisoners and their families.

Christian tradition has long placed a strong emphasis on care for those in prison. This has usually been expressed through the work of the prison chaplaincy and the many faith-based groups that undertake important work with those in prison and on release.

For me "pastoral outreach" has to do with bringing a measure of hope to people who find themselves in hopeless situations. For prisoners, pastoral outreach has two arms: one is the practical help encompassing a wide range of activities from helping them access prison and other services, liaising with their families, chasing up solicitors and

probation officers for them, providing letters of support for court hearings, etc., taking their phone calls in the office and replying to their letters; and then the quieter, more reflective help of listening to them – giving them the space to talk about their situation with its hopes and fears. Indeed, this is the most important part of pastoral outreach – simply listening to them, helping them to believe that things will work out for them, that this is not necessarily the end of the road, that they are not on their own and that we are there to help in any way we can. And it applies equally to prisoners’ families. It can be very time-consuming and emotionally draining work, but ultimately it’s what we’re about and more often than not, it’s what makes all the difference.

Much has been written over the years in articles and interviews about the outreach service provided by the ICPO to prisoners and their families: the campaigning work on behalf of the Birmingham Six, the Guildford Four, the Maguire Seven, the advocacy work on the Transfer of Sentenced Persons, the deportation crisis, the tragic deaths in custody, the efforts at keeping prisoners’ spirits up during the dark years of the eighties and nineties, when to be “Irish” in Britain was to belong to a “suspect community”, much like what British Muslims are experiencing now. Suffice it to say, that had the ICPO not been around, the lives of countless prisoners and their families would have been very different.

This outreach service continues today and whether the prisoner is in the UK, the USA, Australia or South America, there is a sameness about much of the service we provide. It can comprise a letter to the prisoner’s family back home inviting them to keep in touch; it can be a different letter to the prison authorities drawing their attention to certain grievances the prisoner might have; or it can be about providing them with some money to help with the purchase of phone credit, toiletries, etc. And one should not forget the newsletters, the Christmas and St Patrick Day cards we also send them.

Prisoners' needs vary considerably. I remember a prisoner asking how he might obtain a copy of our ICPO newsletter and offering to take out a subscription!

Some prisoners are able to look after themselves reasonably well, but there are many, mostly younger, who feel at risk within the prison system. They are not very articulate and find themselves in a situation they know little about and cannot easily cope with. These prisoners are especially vulnerable and often feel quite lost within the prison system. Some of them have learning difficulties and health problems often associated with drink and drug addiction. Just to visit and spend time with them in their cells is to realise how difficult the prison experience can be for them. It would be difficult to exaggerate the real sense of loneliness and isolation many of them feel.

Contrary to media reports, the prison experience is not an easy one. Many prisoners lead lives of quiet desperation. In prison one is deprived of more than one's freedom. One's dignity and integrity are also diminished by the experience. And the prisoner's family also does time as well. The sheer logistics involved in a family visit with a partner, often with children in tow, travelling long distances to far-flung parts of the country, just to keep a relationship and some semblance of family life alive, never fails to amaze me. Such commitment and dedication are inspiring.

For over twenty-two years I have been privileged to work (through the ICPO) with Irish prisoners and their families (except for a short two and a half year sentence I served in W Scrubs – as chaplain!). Perhaps not surprisingly, given emigration trends over decades, most Irish prisoners worldwide are to be found scattered throughout the 136 strong prison estate of England and Wales. Officially, Irish prisoners now constitute the second largest ethnic group (after Polish prisoners) within the prison system – a fact I attribute to a combination of bad theology and getting caught! However, if one includes

those from the north of Ireland, (who are routinely classified as British), then they are the largest. Around 40% come from a Traveller background and have learning difficulties, drink and drug addiction and mental health problems about which we heard earlier from Ellena.

Obviously, the ICPO cannot visit them all and keep in touch the way we would like. And not all are in need of assistance anyway. Most are content to serve their time as best they can. They are grateful for the visits, letters, etc., but otherwise don't require much in the way of practical assistance.

Others, however, need help with a wide range of issues. The ICPO helps by visiting them, dealing with their complaints, writing letters of support for court appearances and parole hearings, liaising with their families, as well as conducting advocacy work in relation to issues like repatriation, deportation, health and legal matters, discrimination and ill-treatment, etc. It is here that people encounter the human face of the ICPO. Just being there for the prisoners and their families and being willing to help in any practical way is what is important. On numerous occasions I've met with prisoners who have told me that they receive neither letters nor visits. Sometimes this has to do with the fact that they have lost touch with family back in Ireland; sometimes it has to do with the sense of shame they feel about being in prison in the first place. They feel that not only have they let themselves down but they have also let down their families back home.

I can't exaggerate how much it means to these prisoners to receive a visit. Just for them to know that someone out there cares enough about them to visit means so much. And this human face extends to their families as well. Some families can manage the visiting for themselves. But the cost, the time, and the distances are usually prohibitive for most families. And most families are poor anyway and can't afford to visit. At such

times, families and relatives are usually at their most vulnerable and need all the help and support we can give them, especially when there are difficulties surrounding a visit.

I have long been in the habit following a prison visit of phoning prisoners' families back in Ireland to let them know how I found their sons or daughters. The response is almost always heart-warming. Parents, sometimes elderly and in poor health, are just so grateful that someone has taken the trouble to visit their son or daughter and is interested in their well-being. One can almost sense the relief and gratitude over the phone! It is so reassuring for them and helps them cope better with the all-embracing trauma of imprisonment.

Prisons are sacred places. In prison society claims control over the lives of men and women; it is there that we can, if we are not careful, assume the roles of Gods. And whether the prison is large or small, in the UK, the USA, Australia or South America, the air within the establishment holds a particular density created not only by the crimes committed (some horrific) but also by the ownership we have taken of the prisoners, whether or not we acknowledge it.

But prisons are also dangerous places. Unlike schools or hospitals – which are places of learning and healing – prisons exist for punishment. Any prisoner risks becoming a victim of crime such as assault, exposure to drug use, robbery and sometimes even serious physical injury. And the anxieties of prison life are compounded by the fact that prison life is largely hidden. Someone has said that the gospels of the imprisoned are impossible to write from a witness perspective. While the administration of justice is carried out in public, prison life occurs behind high walls. Prisons are institutions designed not only to keep people in; they also operate to keep family, friends, and loved ones out! Moreover, family members never get to see the parts of the institution where

their loved ones spend most of their time - the cells, the landings, the yards, the education and workshop areas; all these places must be imagined rather than seen firsthand.

Although some prisoners are inside for very serious sexual and violent crimes, most of the prisoners I encounter are young men who have difficulty coping with life in general and have committed relatively minor offences. Many of them are just sad and lost individuals. Visiting them helps one realise that they are not just names and addresses on a file or data-base or statistics in a report, but real people with feelings and emotions, hopes and fears. Their Irish identity is important to them but can sometimes reinforce their cultural isolation within the prison engendering that “quiet desperation” I spoke of earlier.

Needless to say, throughout the past twenty plus years I have seen many changes in the prison system in England and Wales – sadly, not all for the better. I’ve watched the prison population double in that time; I’ve seen the prison culture change from one of care and rehabilitation to a present day ‘industry’ with private companies and multi-nationals like G4S, SERCO and Sodexo making huge profits for their shareholders out of people’s misfortune and misery. Indeed, there have been more dramatic changes in the past five years than in the previous twenty-five. And we haven’t finished yet!

Without doubt the most significant change has been the role of the prison chaplaincy and its pastoral outreach to prisoners. Prison chaplaincy has long played a very important role in the life of the prison system. The chaplain was (and still is) the one person to whom the prisoner could go to in trust and confidence. Set up along denominational lines, chaplaincy was an oasis of calm in a setting of disorder and disharmony. However, it was probably inevitable that along with the other prison

departments/services, chaplaincy would also have to change. The most obvious change has been the move from denominational service to a multi-faith agency offering a generic service to prisoners and staff. Chaplaincies are now multi-faith centres where statutory duties are carried out in a generic manner.

While there are good arguments for and against this concept of chaplaincy, a worrying development is the unavailability of ongoing chaplaincy service due to the cuts being imposed on the prison service by central government. Several prisons in England Wales now have seriously scaled down chaplaincies offering little more than the statutory religious service, usually on a weekday.

I recall drawing attention to this in a letter I wrote to The Tablet when chaplain at WS, highlighting the work of prison chaplains in the face of cuts and their general marginalization within the prison system. I pointed out that while there was general acceptance of the need to provide religious services for faith practitioners, there was much less understanding and appreciation of the pastoral care provided by the prison chaplaincy as a whole. Indeed, throughout the prison estate there has been a tendency in recent years to undervalue this work. Some chaplains even find themselves having to justify their pastoral activity because it does not fit neatly into established categories and cannot be easily measured by the performance indicators so beloved of the service's bureaucracy. In short, the Christian vision of pastoral outreach to prisoners is far removed from the ideas of policy makers and managers in the prison service and other public institutions. These changes have taken place against a background of creeping secularization in society as a whole. This is perhaps the biggest change in British society I have noticed in 38 years of living in England. And it affects all the public institutions but especially prisons and hospitals.

The trouble with pastoral activity is that it does not fit neatly into established categories and cannot be easily measured by performance indicators. Statistics and performance targets can measure neither the effectiveness nor the true value of pastoral care. How, for example, does one evaluate the time spent listening and talking to prisoners in the course of a morning or afternoon visit, helping them cope with the tensions of prison life and their separation from family and loved ones?

But it's not all doom and gloom. I have seen prisoners look at a sentence as an opportunity to make life-changing decisions. I have also seen how prison staff and services can respond positively to this desire for change and how prisoners can gain new perspectives and skills. I have also seen prisoners make that all important transition from prison to accommodation and work and normal life. But rarely do we read about these success stories. Sadly, it is the case that prisoners rarely experience the hope expressed by St Pope John Paul II, that prison can be a place of redemption. Increasingly in the UK, the prison system is becoming one large human warehouse, where the ideal of rehabilitation is seldom realized and where the likelihood of reoffending on release is increased.

Rehabilitation is about giving people hope that they can change and the tools with which to do so. The media constantly feed us with stories of failure and of risk; but what's really inspiring are the stories of people changing for the better and turning their lives around, of which we hear less and less. Yet that is the story that really makes communities safer. The way people change is through other people. Unfortunately the mentoring scheme, until recently seen as a way forward, is in danger of being replaced by the concept of supervision – which is about holding someone to account, rather than helping them chart a course so they are able to rehabilitate themselves.

In short, the system is now all stick and no carrot. In the public discourse and the way the issues are presented to the public by policy makers, there seems to be a sense that those in charge of the prisons have given up on hope. The talk now is of ‘the market’ and ‘programmes’, not about prisoners as people. For whatever reason, empathy has been pushed to the sidelines. We don’t feel empathetic towards certain groups of people anymore – even fairly obvious groups such as unemployed young people, who we tend to blame for their situation. And, sadly, this fits the prevailing mood of today’s society.

If one looks at what most people in prison were before they were labelled ‘offenders’, they were people who had terrible upbringings, people who were abused, people with mental health problems – the sort of people we would normally tend to have some sympathy with, but we don’t. We tend to see them as a drain, a burden rather than part of us. We forget that there but for the grace of God go so many of us. It has always struck me that the generalized prejudice against offenders is one of the last unchallenged prejudices in our society.

All in all, the need for the sort of pastoral outreach provided by the ICPO has never been more urgent. Irish prisoners (in common with the rest of the prison population) now face serious problems in the immediate future. Firstly, there is the new configuration of prisons throughout the estate – the closing of small local prisons and the building of large American-style Titan prisons (what my colleague, Conn MacGabhann calls Tesco-type prisons) which means that prisoners are more likely to be housed farther away from their families. It also makes for a dramatic change in the important prisoner-officer relationship with the prisoner relegated to a number on the prison computer rendering attempts at rehabilitation and re-integration purely notional.

Secondly, there is the reform of the Probation Service – with almost 70% of it now in the private sector and run on a payment by results basis by agencies and companies with little or no experience of prison work. And finally, the recent abolition of free legal aid which further penalizes prisoners especially those maintaining innocence.

The increased anxiety and distress caused by these changes are already having an adverse effect on the wellbeing of many prisoners. Given this scenario, the pastoral outreach service of the ICPO is perhaps more needed than ever before. Hopefully, we can continue to make a difference to their lives by offering them hope in addition to the other more practical services.

And mention of the word “hope” again brings me neatly back to the concept of hope I started with. We are all familiar with the saying attributed to Jesus of Nazareth: “I was in prison and you visited me”. However, there is an even older statement - some two thousand years earlier, to be exact – by the prophet Ezekiel during the time of the Babylonian captivity: “I sat where they sat” (Ez 3:15). While this imprisonment happened a long time ago, the story of how the Israelites kept the flame of hope alive in the midst of such tribulation resounds down the centuries, offering us an understanding of the presence of God in spite of his apparent absence. As I said earlier, it is this hope above all else that we are challenged to bring to the prisoners and families we serve.

Still, there is only so much a small organization can do with limited resources in terms of finance and personnel. And it is disheartening to find that even after thirty years of service, there are still prisoners in parts of the country we are not reaching due to lack of resources.

Travelling around the country, I’m constantly being made aware of how much more we could be doing with increased and secure funding. But that, as they say, is a discussion

for another day. Irish prisoners and their families are fortunate in having an organization like the ICPO to help and support them. And today is an occasion for celebrating what has been achieved and the difference we have made to so many lives over so many years.

Fr Gerry McFlynn

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