

The Early Days of the ICPO

A Personal Reflection

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Introduction

As I prepared lunch for family down for the All Ireland last September, Gerry McFlynn (London ICPO) rang to ask if I would give an input at a conference to celebrate 30 years of ICPO's work. I was honoured to be asked but suggested he approach more eloquent and central players who could speak about the history of the service. Anyway, 1 Dec seemed a long way off; Gerry said to think about it, but with his usual tenacity, was not easily fobbed off, so here I go and hope to do justice to the founders of the ICPO service, Anastasia Crickley, Breda Slattery and PJ Byrne of IECE with the support of Bobby Gilmore of the Irish Chaplaincy. It was they who faced the challenging task of responding to the courageous voice of Sr Sarah Clarke, who spoke at an IECE conference in 1983 and called on the Irish Bishops to offer pastoral support to the families of prisoners as they tried to locate family members in prisons the length and breadth of England.

Anastasia and Breda with PJ's support convened a meeting of key people and, in advance of its time before the term 'evidence based approach' was coined, Stasia carried out research into the needs of families with a relative imprisoned abroad - from England to USA and France to Thailand. Based on the evidence, a clear need existed for a structured service to respond to needs that were emerging in the late 70's and early 80's.

Thus negotiations commenced to establish a service for prisoners and their families in Ireland. This was not as easy as it sounded – it took many meetings, much persuasion and strong backing from Cardinal Tomás O'Fiaich, Bishop Edward Daly, Archbishop Cunnane and Bishop Eamon Casey to dispel any lingering doubt about the need for such a vital service. The Bishops' Conference provided initial set up funds, under the auspices of the IECE and in conjunction with Bobby Gilmore, Director of the Irish Chaplaincy in London.

Traditionally, the Chaplaincy had to respond to employment and accommodation needs so this was new terrain and it presented a challenge to official church bodies to identify with issues of justice and human rights.

A formidable management group was established with PJ as chair, Anastasia as Vice chair and Breda as Secretary. They brought on board the late John O'Connell and Breifne Walker, Columban and Spiritan priests, Brian Judge and former President Mary McAleese.

It was a time of great fear amongst the Irish community amid hostility from the media, not only in England but even more so in Ireland. A US lawyer, Mary Pike, who worked in the US for Irish prisoners facing deportation, reminded me recently of just how hard times were then for families and prisoners – who were for the most part abandoned and their avenues of hope so limited. They were defined by who they were and where they came from – mostly poor and vulnerable but also facing racism and discrimination as foreigners in prison systems, a theme that was to underpin so much of ICPO's work over the following years – a theme that is likely to have new resonance given the terrible events that have unfolded in France and Belgium in recent weeks.

Formally established in 1985, as a subsection of the IECE, with its own independent committee, ICPO set out to

- offer a support service to all Irish prisoners abroad, regardless of faith or offence, and to their families in Ireland
- research and provide information to families, prisoners and other key stakeholders and
- lobby on relevant issues that gave rise to the problems faced by families & prisoners

I would like to pay tribute to the vision and courage of the founding group for their foresight in establishing this model of service - it did not just rest on a fire brigade approach to the problems faced by prisoners and their families but set out to address underlying causes. It was a model that stood the test of time and enabled the development of a professional but caring service that I am glad to say continues to this day.

This was largely due to the effective leadership of ICPO Chair PJ Byrne, ably succeeded by Pat Hannon along with a strategic management group and dedicated staff team and volunteers (Anne, Nola, Srs Catherine, Nuala and Maureen, Lotte, Ailish) along with Gerry and Carmel in the London office.

The first steps entailed building relationships and trust - with families, prisoners, other church bodies, statutory services and government departments, the most important of which was the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA). And it may sound trite now, but, gaining the confidence of the Consular services, while still maintaining a critical role in promoting the rights of prisoners and their families during very challenging times in Anglo-Irish relations, was one of ICPO's most important achievements. It took time (13 years to be exact) to get funding for the Dublin office, not a lot of money but the significance of gaining core funding from DFA was crucial acknowledgement of the complementarity of ICPO's role in supporting families to maintain contact with relatives imprisoned overseas. We had already managed to obtain funding for the London office from DION, a newly established emigrant welfare fund channeled through the labour attaché in the Irish Embassy in London.

The other key steps were to identify a small number of strategic issues that would help a broad range of prisoners and families by drawing in the wider support of NGOs, campaigners, and internationalising the work – through the European Group for Prisoners Abroad (EGPA) and linking with human rights activists.

What did the work entail?

Direct work with prisoners and their families: listening to their needs and experiences; visiting them in their homes or in prisons in England, Scotland, France, Spain, Germany, Holland, Poland, the US and Peru.

Other aspects of the work meant submissions and delegations to government or human rights bodies both at home and abroad, campaigns on miscarriage of justice cases, lobbying with other agencies for improved conditions (removal of handcuffs on prisoner prior to operation).

Anne organized a penfriend scheme for prisoners and it was she who also produced a special Newsletter which was, and still is so warmly welcomed by prisoners and I know that PJ will be delighted that it is still going – no mean feat to have survived almost 30 years – more than can be said for national print media!

Phases of the Work

(1) Establishment of the service to **all** prisoners and the development of campaigns for justice.

When I think of the prisoners, I think of their stoicism in the face of inhumane conditions, isolation, distance, language and cultural barriers, and much more.

When I think of their families, I think of their sacrifice, the travel, accommodation problems, their fears and uncertainties, their love and sometimes their shame, their suffering at the death of a prisoner, the harshness of prison regimes that cannot allow the slightest deviation even for compassionate reasons and I think of the suffering of mothers like Sarah Conlon, Annie Maguire or Lily Hill and all the families.

ICPO set as a strategic objective to work on miscarriage of justice cases which until then had been raised only by brave individuals (Denis Faul, Ray Murray, Joe McVeigh, Michael Farrell, Bernadette McAliskey etc) but not by any institution or group in an organized way.

The families of the Birmingham Six, Guildford 4, Annie Maguire had not met formally as a group, so, when invited by ICPO, they came to meetings in Clonard monastery with the support of Fr Gerry Reynolds, Des Wilson, and Pax Christi members.

The campaigns started to build in earnest then and over the next 5 years grew to global proportions. But it was ultimately the families of the prisoners who did so much to keep the cases alive.

This work necessitated the addition of a 4th aim:

to seek human rights protections for Irish prisoners abroad, emigrants and refugees at an international level when a resolution of these cases could not be achieved at domestic or bilateral level.

But even that arena would have been ineffective without the people power that brought politicians and governments and broad sectors of society in behind the call for justice.

It was the work of ordinary people and workers, community, church and women's groups who kept the pressure on politicians, church personnel, lawyers, media and Trade Unions in Ireland, England, the US and globally with days of action, parades, meetings, petitions, events, hearings and many other ways of raising their cases.

During this period, new personnel on the ICPO management committee chaired by Pat Hannon (Lawyer, priest and theologian), brought an added, strategic dimension to the work at a crucial stage – Michael Farrell and Ursula O’Hare brought international human rights expertise and theologians Dermot Lane and Bernard Treacy enabled the constant threading back to ICPO’s founding inspiration, rooted in the Pope’s message on his visit to Ireland in 1979, to make the care of prisoners a priority.

I would like to pause for a moment to think of another family struggling to keep the eyes of the world on a miscarriage of justice, a 22 year old prisoner (a military intelligence analyst) of Irish background, serving 25 years in a US military prison for telling the world about human rights abuses / attacks by US soldiers on unarmed civilians in Iraq, 2009). 25 years after Guildford 4 were released, having served a gruelling 15 years in various prisons in England, I met Gerry Conlon again two years ago at a meeting to campaign for the release of Chelsea Manning, Gerry spoke eloquently and passionately about his own journey and the need for whistleblowers like Chelsea Manning and asked for solidarity with the Manning Fox family from Wales with roots in Dublin and Cork. At once Gerry McFlynn kicked into action and met the family en route to USA to visit Chelsea. If people want to write to Chelsea, details can be obtained from ICPO.

(2) Consolidation of the service: This phase of the work was less high profile but essential to ensure that all prisoners were offered a service and the stepping up of work to get prisoners transferred. This resulted in ratification of a Council of Europe Convention some 9 years after signature by Ireland, following intensive lobbying on a cross border basis by families and agencies (ICPO, CAJ, NIACRO & NAPO). The purpose of the Convention is to aid rehabilitation and reduce suffering for innocent families and this was central to our interagency efforts to protect human rights in a low level but persistent way which promoted fundamental respect for the dignity of every human being, no matter how small, excluded or vilified. Once ratified, implementation of the Convention’s provisions became the focus of the work and this was slow. Just having laws or policies in place does not guarantee implementation and this is why ICPO’s work continues to be relevant. I look forward to the contributions in the afternoon to learn about how transfers are progressing at this stage.

(3) Contribution to Peace Process: during this phase work continued on transfers and in addition there was a focus on the release and reintegration of politically motivated prisoners. Interestingly, although ICPO was primarily funded by the Catholic Church, it offered a service to all prisoners regardless of conviction or religious belief. In fact, we had Loyalists on our books as they had no one to support them in emigrant destinations especially for family visits - we also had a few Sikhs - thanks to Sr Catherine's all-encompassing care during prison visits. When we had Irish prisoners in Japan she was invaluable as she had taught Japanese princesses there in the past and had very useful contacts! Mind you she also had a few unsavoury contacts in Ireland that nonetheless came up trumps when we needed to fund a destitute family or returning prisoner! God will judge she used to say!

So ICPO's role as an advocacy group- somewhere between a pastoral service, the consular services and offering a rights-based approach meant that it was suitably placed without agenda to play a small role at the Forum for Peace & Reconciliation and in supporting ex-prisoners projects and the Educational Trust for ex-prisoners.

(4) At the end of that period there was a widespread belief that emigration no longer existed and an impression also that, with the peace process in train, there was no longer any problems with the treatment of Irish prisoners abroad. So, with our parent body IECE, led by Paul Byrne OMI, research was commissioned to explore whether there was a continued need for the services. That research into migration trends in Ireland showed that, despite the ending of net emigration, 40,000 people continued to leave the shores each year and that Irish people were the largest ethnic minority in the British prison system. ICPO concluded that there was still significant forced emigration of vulnerable Irish people and that the service should gear up to meet this need.

Issues that needed to be addressed in the next phase included the continued need for pastoral visits, support to families at home, prison visits, liaison with relevant authorities at home and abroad, monitoring of transfers, support for bereaved families at times of death, funeral and inquest, support with parole requests, miscarriages of justice and lengthy pre-trial detention, special supports for illiterate, mentally ill or isolated prisoners and in particular for Irish Travellers, services for deported prisoners some of whom may not have lived in Ireland for over 40 years, and scrutiny of emergency legislation in the wake of global attacks such as

9/11 (2001).

Concluding Comments

The flexibility which a church based service can offer, combined with the resources and standards that a partnership approach can bring, was an innovative and valuable new development, including the positive relationships built with Embassy and consular staffs overseas.

Care for those deprived of their liberty and in institutions must remain a high level priority. Following the relocation and restructuring of all the services of the Bishops' Conference in 2002, we were pleased that, although a significant offer of funds from the Irish Probation Service was inexplicably rejected, the Bishops' Conference agreed to sustain a pastoral outreach to prisoners overseas and their families.

I truly welcome the fact that the service has been maintained and the London office strengthened thanks to the work of Gerry, Carmel, Breda and Liz, Grainne, Brian and Srs Agnes, Maureen and Anne and the many others who continue to support the work and the vision.

Why is the history of ICPO relevant today?

Migration is the biggest issue of our times. Forced migration means that many vulnerable men, women and children need our support and their human rights protected. The sustained relevance of ICPO's work and commitment to a common shared humanity links the needs of our emigrants and prisoners overseas (once the 'Suspect Community') to the needs of migrants in Ireland – we need to extend a welcome, oppose racism and challenge fear in this age of global movements, resulting from conflict, environmental degradation or war.

Displaced peoples need solidarity, services and human rights protections and opportunities to share their knowledge and skills. Irish people have strongly supported this, as has the church.

This conference today offers an opportunity to thank the Bishops, the Chaplaincy and ICPO staff and management for doing this in challenging times in the past and to reaffirm the

leadership commitment that was so courageously made 30 years ago. My life has been shaped by that experience and it continues to inform my work with Travellers in Pavee Point today. For that and for the families and prisoners who contacted us, I am deeply grateful.

ICPO is a valuable resource. It carries the Christian message in practice and draws in many who believe in justice and rights ... as well as mercy. It should be promoted widely.