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The following article was written by Fr Michael Walsh CM for the September 2002 issue of 'Oceania Vincentian'. ('Oceania Vincentian' is a Publication in the Australian Province of the Vincentians):

A REFLECTION ON PRISON CHAPLAINCY

Michael Walsh CM

Many of us in the Australian Province of the Vincentians would remember the large painting hanging near the stairs at St. Joseph's Eastwood. I refer to the one of St Vincent with the galley slave. It was explained to me that this was a famous painting and I should be inspired by it. It gave me the creeps and I freely admit that I refused to look at it.

In later years, driving past Long Bay gaol, I recall thanking God that I had not been called to follow Vincent in this aspect of his ministry. No doubt sometime in my life I had read, "The compassionate heart of Saint Vincent de Paul made no distinction between one class of unfortunate creatures and another; he embraced them all in the same charity, not excepting those who, if they had led orderly lives, would have escaped punishment. His heart went out to prisoners and galley slaves, just as it did to the poor and the sick. If God's loving kindness extended to all the wretched, why should he impose a limit to his?"¹

This brief paper is simply a reflection article that I have been asked to present by the Vincentian Studies Group for *Oceania Vincentian*. I hope that this article may assist confreres and others to understand a little more of the role of the prison chaplain.

For those who may not be aware, I spend most of my time at Long Bay prison but also visit Silverwater complex, which includes Mulawa, the maximum-security women's gaol.

The Parishioners

I often explain that I see the prisons as a parish. As in parish life, I believe I am called to 'walk with' the parishioners especially in times of crisis in their lives. Crisis for a prisoner can involve issues such as court appearances, including convictions and sentencing, but also sickness, conflicts with other prisoners or officers, concerns about family members. There are plenty of opportunities for listening, encouraging, supporting, and challenging. I also pray with the inmates, either in an informal manner in the cells, in the open spaces, or more formally in some buildings that are euphemistically called chapels. Celebration of Reconciliation can take place at the most inappropriate places! Sharing with an inmate who can't express himself without a few f...s, in an old, cold, damp cell with photos of naked women all over the walls, constantly being interrupted by prisoners and screws, is certainly an experience. It is in this place where I feel most in tune with Vincent and with what I feel I have been called to do.

I also attend court (I live near the city) as a support for those facing long sentences and/or those who have no one else to be with them. Those include prisoners who have lost all support systems or those who are arrested at airport or harbour, often with no English or understanding of Australia. On occasions, I have been asked to testify either as a character witness or in relation to information I have received. However, on most occasions, I am simply present in the court or in the basement cells. I find a prisoner prays very powerfully when he/she is waiting for the jury to make a decision!!

I am in the wonderful position of not having to judge; others in the system do that! I have close contact with quite a number of prisoners who have committed the most horrendous crimes. Several of the 'lifers' talk to me of many things. One night a few weeks ago when I was writing up my records at home, I realised that during that day, I had spoken at some length to six inmates who had been charged with murder. I often wonder why this just happens. I believe it has something to do with the concept of 'where else do we go?' No wonder I'm exhausted when I get home!!

There are many different 'kinds' of prisoners, not only in terms of their crime but also in terms of their own opportunities in life. Prison life is relative to what one has outside; if one has no home or other material possessions, no loved ones, no status, then life in gaol can be OK. The opposite applies. For some, being in gaol is worn as a badge of honour and some are admired because they have committed very serious crimes; others eventually realise that there is more to life than being a criminal. Some are desperate to change their lives; many have said to me, "If only someone would help me".

A Challenging Ministry

I work in an environment that does not encourage religious ministry. I have no influence on how the gaol operates; decisions on how each prisoner is treated are made with no reference to me. Some of the officers are outwardly friendly and helpful; some make it very clear that they will cause me as much hassle as possible, others are hostile to me and my endeavours. Recently, an inmate from the sex-offenders section died. I went from that section to another and mentioned the death to a lady officer who said 'You beauty. One less f...g molester.' As time has gone on, there has been an improving relationship with some officers, but there is constant turnover of a huge staff

It can be a frustrating ministry. The opportunity to meet with the prisoners is very limited especially in Maximum-Security areas. Here the guys are allowed out of their cells from 9am to 11.15am and 1.30-3.15 pm. Full day 'lock-ins' are common; shortage of staff or 'security' are the usual reasons given for the prisoners being locked in their cells for the entire day or even for days at a time. Naturally, anything planned, such as Mass, is cancelled. The minimum-security areas allow me more opportunity to engage the prisoners but these too can be subject to 'lock-ins'. With almost 3,000 inmates in the prisons in the Sydney archdiocese, my personal contact will always be minimal.

Prisons are violent places. In my visitation of the Long Bay Hospital or the new annexe of Prince of Wales, I have been appalled to see how some prisoners have bashed, kicked, or stabbed each other. Officers at the recent riot at Goulburn gaol received horrific head injuries. Racial tensions abound among the ethnic communities such as Asians (especially Vietnamese), Islanders and the Lebanese. Aboriginal inmates are often subject to violence; they can also be the main offenders.

I am pleased that I work with others. I work with Sister Zita Barron, an elderly Brigidine sister at Long Bay. At the large Remand Centre at Silverwater, a young married man, David Harrison is the Catholic chaplain; at Mulawa (women), a married woman, Margaret Wiseman and a Dominican sister, June Peck share the role. They are all inspiring people. We meet regularly at my home. There are also chaplains from other Christian and non-Christian denominations. Our monthly meetings are very valuable. I have appreciated this opportunity to work with men and women from other churches.

The Political Issues

Politicians in this state respond to talkback radio and other media outlets urging them to lock up the 'scum of the earth'. A large headline in a Sydney morning paper had the Premier promising, "we will cement 'em in". Every attempt is made to be seen to be 'tough on crime'. Prisoner numbers are increasing with large new gaols being built in several centres around NSW. Any person who has a previous conviction will in future be refused bail. There is no clear indication where the money for these prisons is coming from; presumably cut from health, education and welfare budgets. A Select Committee from the Legislative Council of NSW recently presented a report on the increase in Prisoner Population in NSW. This report was actively supported by many in the community including The Australian Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes. The report recommended that \$42 million allocated for the building of a new women's prison would be better spent on community-based rehabilitation programmes. The report was totally rejected by both major political party leaders. Good policy; bad politics.

Since the Aboriginal Deaths in Custody Commission some years ago, there have been cultural days organised to assist young offenders to understand something of their background. This was extended to the Asian and Islander communities. They were a wonderful success. I had attended the Asian Cultural Day held in the outdoor gym area at Long Bay. The Buddhist monks led the midday gathering, chanting with the lads and encouraging them in their traditional values. This was followed by a simple meal of cold Asian food. The media discovered the event and showed a total unwillingness to give it any credibility. The Government has now directed that such days be cancelled.

Rehabilitation programmes do exist at Long Bay and some other gaols. Large sums of money are allocated for the treatment of sex-offenders since the Royal Commission in NSW. The aim is not to cure, but to extend the period of time until their next offence. (Studies seem to show that sex-offenders are serial offenders). There are over 400 sex offenders in Long Bay. There is also a Violence Prevention Programme. It is inadequately funded and even though the psychologists who lead the programme are committed to their task, the lack of suitable facilities makes the results very problematic. Recent 'graduates' included those who shot dead the young policeman in Sydney recently.

Personal Reflections; Lack of Experience with the Poor

I appreciate working in this ministry. It gives me an opportunity to be with many who suffer, not only because of their incarceration, but also because of the circumstances of their lives. In my life as a priest, I have rarely met people whom I see as the 'poor' of this country. I realise that even though I have been very active in pastoral ministry, I have rarely met people who:

Are extremely dependent on drugs

Suffer constant relationship breakdown; experience many relationships; have many half/sisters, brothers

Do not know the names of their parents/siblings

Were physically and sexually abused as children and still have nightmares about the experience.

Are illiterate

Suffer extreme mental illness

Have never had fulfilling employment due to lack of skills, training, or physical/mental illness

Have so little self esteem that they violently attack their own bodies

Have never received a personal Christmas card

Do not have any friends who would visit

Who have no one who loves them

Maybe there were plenty of these in the parishes in which I worked, but I did not find many. There were plenty of people in need such as the sick, bereaved etc but those who fall into the categories mentioned above were certainly not the focus of my ministry.

Before this ministry, I knew little of the welfare system. I knew little of custody battles and the family law court. I had little contact with parents who had their children taken away from them due to maltreatment. I knew little of Apprehended Violence Orders and their affect on people. I knew little of the penalties imposed on those who do not follow exact instructions of government departments such as the Department of Community Services. I knew little of methadone and its side effects, or of drug rehabilitation programmes. I now know a little!

I appreciate working in this ministry but am saddened that I did not work in this or similar twenty years ago. I remember a Provincial saying to me many years ago, 'if you want to work with the really poor, your only option is to apply for Fiji'. I did not want to leave Australia. Whilst I am adamant that not everyone is called to such a ministry, I have always been a little saddened by the actions of those who, in the past, strongly opposed others who wished to work with such people. I will never forget the Assembly where some confreres lobbied so passionately AGAINST setting up a 'team' of confreres who would devote themselves exclusively to the destitute. We have always said, in formal documents and in other presentations that we work with the 'marginalised', the 'most abandoned', 'those despised by society'. Until now, I have not had an opportunity to do so.

Horses for Courses !

Several confreres have told me that they could never do this work. That may be so. However, I am surprised that I can do this with little difficulty and I wonder if others would have a similar experience. Looking at it from the other perspective, there are many other roles in the province that I could never undertake. Just imagine if I had been asked to teach theology or to take responsibility for the finances, or heavens forbid, the administration. It's horses for courses, as I always say!

¹ Coste CM, Pierre, *The Life and Works of St Vincent de Paul*, (New York, New City Press, 1987), II, 30.