

WHEN WE
VISIT JESUS
IN PRISON

**A GUIDE FOR
CATHOLIC MINISTRY**

Chaplain Dale S. Recinella

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*This book is dedicated to the thousands of men and women
God has allowed me to serve inside prisons and jails,
and to the hundreds of volunteers
God has allowed me to stand next to as we served them.*

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FOREWORD

Sign me up, Brother Dale!

I begin the honor of presenting this book to potential readers by admitting that, from the start, I never thought that I would ever find myself thinking about or highlighting the importance of the call to prison ministry. Quite frankly, I'm involved in many other things. In fact, the title selected for this book by "Brother" Dale (as Recinella is called by those involved with prisons in Florida), *When We Visit Jesus in Prison: A Guide for Catholic Ministry*, was at first a bit too much for me to absorb. My first thought was: Jesus is in prison? He can be found there?

Oh, yes, that's right, he's in the prison chapel when priests or ministers visit inmates. I would never argue—the good Catholic that I claim to be—that Jesus is not present in the Eucharist. I also would never argue that Jesus is not present in the many hardworking prison staff who, I submit, have one of the most difficult jobs in the world. That would include, I'm quite sure, the "correctional counselors" who make themselves available to help those inmates who genuinely show an interest in wanting to change their behavior. In taking on these seemingly near-impossible tasks, these committed agents are going above and beyond their call of duty and acting as instruments of good will in a place where little good is ever visibly present.

It is from that point of reference, then, that I reflect on the phrase "when we visit Jesus in prison." It causes me to pause and wonder why anyone would want to begin a book on prison ministry with such a title. Why not something more practical like, *A Catholic Layman's Guide to Volunteering in Prisons* or *What Every Catholic Volunteer Needs to Know about Prisons and Prison Ministry*? Maybe it's just me, but if I were thinking about volunteering in a prison, the thing that would grab my attention would be to know—and be forewarned about—what I would be getting myself into, lest I might become intimidated and scared or, worse, assaulted.

As I opened this book, however, expecting to begin reading about how I might need to cautiously prepare myself for prison ministry

and about my need to heed the potential warnings from its author, who has spent the better part of his adult life in prison ministry, I was stunned. You see, I thought the focus of prison ministry preparation would be all about the one who was volunteering his or her time. I thought the focus would center on self-protection and Bible verse memorization. I thought I would learn about special techniques to counter arguments that God was not real and about how hard it is to find grace in a prison setting. With my thirty-plus years of law enforcement experience, along with the commensurate amount of accrued cynicism, I expected to read stories about how prison volunteers need to be keen to the tricks and not get “conned” by the cons. After all, in this kind of work, the time is short and we need to be well-prepared to meet the challenge to quickly convince prisoners to repent in order to save their souls.

I was wrong! As Dale Recinella points out, prison ministry is a faith walk, not a head trip. What he makes unmistakably clear is that the focus of this book is not about the volunteer. It’s not about me, and it’s not about you. It’s not about anyone who thinks it would be a novel idea to volunteer in a prison because it would create good conversation at a cocktail party or that it would make a prison volunteer look good among their friends in church. It’s not about self-protection or about learning any tricks of the trade at all. No, the focus is about something entirely different, and far more important. It’s about discerning a call to make ourselves available in loving service by opening our own eyes and looking for Jesus in the eyes of those who are considered among the least in our society: the incarcerated. It’s about visiting the Jesus who lives in each and every one of our brothers and sisters who have been locked away in prison and ostensibly forgotten about. It’s about witnessing the suffering Jesus in inmates who are held captive for ransom—a ransom that they cannot pay—a ransom that they, like us, will never be able to pay.

The focus of this book is about reaching out to those who need to know and learn that there is One who has paid the ransom already. The fact that Jesus has paid the ransom for them is best illustrated by our witness that he has paid the ransom for us. That in itself is

something to seriously ponder and reflect upon. We are sinners, too. Without that basic understanding and acceptance of our weak selves, we will never be able to reach out to those in prison who are in need. Brother Dale clearly explains that in order to be an agent of transformation, we must first be engaged in personal transformation ourselves, in and through our Catholic faith. That is what empowers us to be our brothers' and sisters' keeper.

To be sure, there are many who might read this book and never involve themselves in direct prison ministry. This kind of work is not for everyone, and certainly not for the faint of heart. But for those whose hearts have been set on fire to evangelize in a way consistent with what Pope Francis has declared over and over, this book is a challenge for us to awaken, to listen to Jesus calling us beyond our own limited ideas of mercy, and to see Jesus at the center of a movement to set the captives free. What perfect timing for this book to be released now, in the midst of so much national turmoil over criminal justice reform.

Let's make no mistake about what it means to set captives free; I am not suggesting that we open the doors to prisons and let everyone walk freely into society. Most inmates are not ready for that and, understandably, neither are we. What I am suggesting, though, is exactly what Dale Recinella is challenging us to do: to sense the importance of seeing Jesus in those who are held captive and to share with them the truths of our faith that, by Jesus' blood, we have all been set free. *Brother Dale* reveals to us how our suffering Lord lives in the hearts and minds of all those who are held captive—no matter what they have done—and how Jesus longs to reach out to them, with a love that only he can provide. They are, after all, God's children, no less than each one of us "free-people" are.

Many of us have been brought to our own knees in thanksgiving and gratitude for being set free—from ourselves and from sin. Through our own experience of sharing in Christ's death and resurrection, of coming to the end of ourselves and surrendering our own woundedness, we hold at our disposal the keys to God's kingdom. Because those keys are deep within our heart, we can share the "good


news” with those who desperately need to be set free from their own suffering. In so doing, we become involved in alleviating the very suffering that Jesus endured for all of us. That is the powerful message of this book.

Weaving together the truths of our Trinitarian faith and themes developed through the many writings of our church forbearers and current leaders, Dale Recinella provides us with a road map to becoming an effective prison minister. I must reiterate that this book is not going to result in every reader becoming a prison minister. In fact, it might confirm to some readers that prison ministry is not how they are called to serve. But for those of us who are interested in prison ministry and how closely it is tied to the pastoral mission of the Church, this book will heighten our awareness and perhaps even encourage us to answer and pursue the call to prison ministry. Imbedded in this complete and thorough manuscript are virtually all the resources available to become a Catholic prison minister; but these resources are secondary to the primary purpose of the book, which is to set our hearts on fire and assist us in understanding the nature of prison ministry in our Catholic faith. Being able to recognize the tools of a trade doesn’t make anyone a natural for the task. It is only through sincere preparation and becoming aware of why the tools are important for the task that we can use them effectively.

With thirty-two-plus years of working in law enforcement under my belt, this book did exactly that for me. After reading it, I sensed more strongly than ever before that God was calling me to prison ministry. It is interesting to me, but I suppose not surprising after my many years of presenting violators of the law before judges and watching many of them be taken off to prison, that I now sense that my role—my calling—has evolved to one of accepting the challenge to reach out and to help “set the captives free.” I hope and pray that, whatever the reason you have been led to read this book, some of you will sense that same calling and will be moved to engage, either directly or by becoming prayer warriors, in the ministry to “visit Jesus in prison.”

Thank you, Brother Dale, for opening my eyes and for being the light of Christ for all who have been so enormously blessed to know you and your wife Susan.

George F. Kain, Ph.D.
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Pope Francis washed the feet of a dozen inmates at a juvenile detention center in a Holy Thursday ritual that he celebrated for years as archbishop and is continuing now that he is pope.... “This is a symbol, it is a sign—washing your feet means I am at your service,” Francis told the youngsters. “Help one another. This is what Jesus teaches us. This is what I do. And I do it with my heart. I do this with my heart because it is my duty, as a priest and bishop I must be at your service.”¹

INTRODUCTION

Imagine that you have been asked by your bishop or pastor to do volunteer ministry at a nearby jail or prison. With the assistance of your diocesan or parish ministry office, you have worked hard to obtain all the clearances necessary to enter the detention facility. You have learned all the rules about entering and leaving, signing in and signing out. You have learned which bathrooms you are allowed to use and when. You have learned which buildings and wings you are allowed to enter. You have learned how you will be searched and what you must never bring into the prison. You have learned the long list of things that you cannot even have in your locked car parked in the prison parking lot. You have memorized the internal phone number that you are to call in case of an emergency or if you are threatened or taken hostage in a locked or barricaded room or if an inmate under your responsibility suddenly has a seizure. And you have learned which phone you must use to make such calls.

You have accepted the indignities of being searched so thoroughly at the prison entrance station that the uniformed and gloved strangers

who clear you know more about the moles and bumps on your back-side than you do. You have tried (and are still trying) to get accustomed to razor wire and electric charged fences and to the gnawing feeling in your gut at being locked inside those fences, unable to leave—unable to even get to your car in the parking lot—unless somebody somewhere pushes a button that pops a door or a gate open for you. You have learned not to think about the fact that the someone who holds your freedom in the palm of his or her hand may be a person you do not even know, somebody you cannot even see, someone on the receiving end of a microphone or a camera embedded in the walls, someone who may not like you and may not like the fact that you are in this prison. You have learned not to think about the fact that you are totally at that stranger’s mercy until you step outside the prison fence.

You knew this would not be easy. You have sought and received spiritual support and encouragement. Your friends at church have prayed with you for spiritual guidance and protection. Your bishop or pastor has prayed over you, commissioned you, perhaps even blessed and anointed you. Your spouse and family struggled with the idea of you serving in this way. But they have come to terms with it. Before you leave the house to head to the prison, they hug you and whisper, “Say hello to Jesus for me.”

And now you are there, inside, standing in front of a chapel full of inmates in blue or grey or white or orange prison clothes. Or standing at cell front in a maximum security segregation wing looking at one man through the Plexiglas window in the solid steel door of his cell. Or sitting in a metal floor-bolted chair in a small circle of female inmates in a day room at a detention center. Or sitting in a molded plastic chair in front of a bulletproof glass wall holding a phone tight against your ear to hear the connection to the death row inmate on the other-side of the wall.

The inmate right in front of you stares so intently that you feel disrobed. Not just through your clothes, but as though he or she is peering through your very skin to your soul. His face does not register approval or amusement. She does not look hopeful or grateful.

Instead you sense a kind of dismay, maybe even disbelief or disappointment. The words finally spoken without real interest or anticipation cut you like a knife.

“Why should I spend my time with you instead of watching the game on TV in the day room or pushing iron on the rec yard?”

“What the heck are you doing here?”

“What exactly do you hope to accomplish?”

In the moment of awkward silence that allows the blunt-force trauma of the inmate’s lack of enthusiasm at your hard-earned availability to sink into consciousness, you realize those are darn good questions. They deserve darn good answers.

The purpose of this book is to provide the reader with answers to those questions. Not just any answers, but the answers based upon the mission and identity of the Catholic Church, although we hope some of what is here may be valuable to others of different faith, as well.

We will begin by drawing from the social justice teaching, the ecclesial framework and the catechetical practices of the Church to answer those questions. We will start from the social and economic conditions of the 1980s and 1990s, the period when many current inmates left society for the world inside the prison fences. When those inmates speak of the *world outside*, that is the society they are referencing. Our survey of that world will include the response of our Church to the needs and conditions of those times, a response that is not framed in isolation but rather is rooted in the broader mission of the Church. That will require us to wrestle with the purpose of punishment and criminal justice. We will also address the Catholic understanding of prison ministry as evangelization and how such ministry is to be conducted in a pluralistic setting, especially when there is hostility to Catholic teaching and beliefs.

Then we will look at the most human elements of Catholic prison ministry: first, addressing the needs of the prison ministry volunteers themselves. How does one live out their faith as a Catholic prison ministry volunteer without burnout, without losing their grip on the fundamentals of faith and Eucharistic community?

Next we address the humanity of the offender. Why do people

commit crime? Do those who have broken the law think differently than other people? Do prison ministry volunteers need to watch out for patterns of criminal behavior?

And what are the pastoral needs of people held in prison? What about the officers and staff who work inside the walls and fences? What are the pastoral needs of those affected by incarceration, such as the family and loved ones? Are there special pastoral needs for different types of inmates: the newly incarcerated, the seriously ill, the dying, or those held long-term in solitary confinement cells?

What are the pastoral needs of women held in prison? What about inmates with children on the outside? Do the mentally ill in prison have special needs?

Finally, we must address how Catholic restorative justice teaching challenges us to make changes to our criminal justice system. What are the economic constraints in our society that inhibit such changes? What are the religious constraints in our culture that push against improving our criminal justice system?

This book is intended to introduce the reader to a very broad picture of the facts and realities of Catholic prison ministry in our modern world, illuminated by Catholic teaching and traditions. Where additional resources can be helpful to the reader for deeper understanding, they will be identified.

When possible throughout this writing, I will illuminate and personalize various points by sharing some of my actual experiences from more than twenty-five years of prison ministry. Most often, this will be done through adaptations of various on-point articles I wrote that were first published in *The Florida Catholic*, the statewide newspaper of the Catholic bishops of Florida, or in the *I Was in Prison Online Ezine*. A dotted line before and after each article distinguishes it from the text.

One of the most respected scholars of our day on the subject of the Catholic Church and criminal justice is Professor Andrew Skotnicki of the religious studies department at Manhattan College in New York City. In his book *Criminal Justice and the Catholic Church*, he asserts: "I believe it is essential that Christians find Christ in the prisoner, or

that Christ *be* the prisoner”²² (emphasis in original).

Just out of sight, in the background of every principle set forth in this book on Catholic prison ministry, is my deep conviction that when we visit a man or woman in prison, we visit Jesus Christ coming to us in the face of the prisoner.

As Pope Francis spoke to the young inmates on Holy Thursday of 2013, he told them that it is his duty, as a priest and bishop, to be at the service of those in prison. For those of us who are Catholic but are not priests and bishops, we are offered the privilege of participating in this pastoral work of the Church. As a Catholic prison ministry volunteer, you are part of an ever-expanding army of workers who share in the pastoral ministry of our bishops and priests by bringing the Good News into the darkest and most isolated corners of western civilization: our prisons, jails, and detention centers. God bless your efforts with an abundant harvest and with abundant joy.

Dale S. Recinella
Catholic Correctional Chaplain
Florida Death Row

Christmas through a Looking Glass

It is Christmas Eve morning. Nothing could have prepared me for this.

I process through the guard station and collect my chapel keys.

Spirals of razor wire are heaped two-stories high on the three rows of electrified fence. The silver-gray teeth glisten like tinsel in the crisp morning air. A dozen inmates peer at me from the other side. They are huddling at the gate that separates the chapel from the prison compound.

“Merry Christmas,” smiles the officer. My stomach tenses into a knot.

She hits the button that releases huge electric locks on the steel access doors. A loud bang echoes through the sally port. I step inside the prison. The knot in my belly tightens even more.

The inmates at the gate beat their arms, warming themselves against the

December chill. Small clouds of breath hang in front of their blue fatigues.

Why does this picture jar me? The specifics are no different than usual. It should be just another other day as a volunteer spiritual counselor at Florida's Appalachian Correctional Institution.

But this is not just another day. It is Christmas Eve.

In that moment, I am amazed that I have never wondered what Christmas is like behind bars.

Chapel appointments with volunteers are by "call-out," written requests processed through administration. We open the chapel. A clerk hands me the day's roster—19 call-outs. A normal morning is five.

I phone my wife, "I'll be here until 6:00."

I am wrong. We won't close the chapel until 9:30 Christmas Eve night.

But there's no way I could know that. It's my first time in prison on the morning before Christmas.

I dig in with coffee and my first inmate appointment at 8:30 am. We pray and I ask, "What's on your heart this morning?"

"Give me a reason to not go for the wall," he whispers.

We both know the term is prison slang for feigning an escape attempt in front of the guards, in the hope they will have to kill you.

Men are said to have done such things when they received a "Dear John" letter from their wife or learned of the death of a child. Is Christmas here that painful?

We talk, we cry, we pray. Man after man, blue shirt after blue shirt. Murderers. Rapists. Molesters. No one to call at Christmas. No one to write. No one to see. Their families too far away to visit. Their children severed and adopted by other fathers.

About 5:00 o'clock I tell the clerks we need more "prison Kleenex." The rolls of toilet paper we unwrapped that morning are all down to the cardboard.

My last call-out, an intelligent and verbal man, has met regularly with me all year.

"I'm not saying I shouldn't be here," tears tug at his eyes, "I did terrible things and don't even know why. I can understand why society wants me behind this fence. I'll be here the rest of my life. But I'm a human being. I still need friends and relationships with normal people. I'm a baptized, practicing

Christian. Christmas is our day. Where are the Christians?"

My lame response about people confusing compassion toward wrongdoers with approval of their bad behavior only angers him.

"Jesus said that when his followers visit an inmate, they visit *him!*" he grips the tissue roll with both hands. "Jesus didn't say the inmate had to be innocent. Why isn't anybody visiting Jesus at Christmas?"

Looking away, I stammer, "I don't know."

Soon, it's time for us to end.

"What do you want to pray for?" I ask.

He leans back in his chair, as if he is talking through the ceiling to the heaven above, "What do I want God to give me for Christmas?"


"Sure," I reply.

"That every Christmas all the prisons in Florida will be busting at the seams from all the Christians trying to get in to visit Jesus."

"Brother," I caution, "that prayer could take a long time to answer."

He shrugs, "I'll be here."

PART I
THE FRAMEWORK
FOR MINISTRY



“[Tzedakah]¹ which is linked with justice, was developed in Christianity in the Social Doctrine of the Church. It took quite some time to assimilate the concept of social justice, though now it is accepted everywhere.”

Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio,
now known as Pope Francis²

CHAPTER 1

The Social Justice Framework of Credible and Responsible Prison Ministry

In his discourses with Rabbi Abraham Skorka, then Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, now known as Pope Francis, describes how the deepest meanings of the concept from the Hebrew Scriptures of an affirmative duty to care for the poor—*tzedakah*—have been seeded into Christian understanding through the words of Jesus Christ. For example, with regard to those in prison, Catholics look to the description by Jesus of the Judgment of the Nations:

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit upon his glorious throne, and all the nations will be assembled before him. And he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the king will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared

for you from the foundation of the world. For I was...in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him and say, 'Lord, when did we see you...in prison and visit you?' And the king will say to them in reply, 'Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.'

Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was...in prison, and you did not care for me.' Then they will answer and say, 'Lord, when did we see you...in prison and not minister to your needs?' He will answer them, 'Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.' And these will go off to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."³

Some commentators have summed-up the words of Jesus Christ in Matthew 25:34-40 as: radical evil is apathy in the face of relievable human suffering. This usage of *radical* is in its classic sense as "the root," in other words, the root of evil is apathy in the face of relievable human suffering. One rarely hears about social justice, our God-given duty to care for our fellow man, in popular descriptions of the Last Judgment. But in Jesus' description of the Last Judgment, it appears that our choices whether or not to extend ourselves to care for the suffering of others matter a great deal.

If despite Matthew 25:34-40 we still harbor doubt as to whether Jesus would really judge us for mere indifference (apathy) to the suffering of others, we need only look at his Gospel parable of Dives and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31:

"There was a rich man who dressed in purple garments and fine linen and dined sumptuously each day. And lying at his door was a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who would gladly have eaten his fill of the scraps that fell from the rich man's table. Dogs even used to come and lick his sores.

"When the poor man died, he was carried away by angels to the bosom of Abraham. The rich man also died and was

buried, and from the netherworld, where he was in torment, he raised his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he cried out, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me. Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am suffering torment in these flames.’

“Abraham replied, ‘My child, remember that you received what was good during your lifetime while Lazarus likewise received what was bad; but now he is comforted here, whereas you are tormented. Moreover, between us and you a great chasm is established to prevent anyone from crossing who might wish to go from our side to yours or from your side to ours.’

“He said, ‘Then I beg you, father, send him to my father’s house, for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they too come to this place of torment.’

“But Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them.’

“He said, ‘Oh no, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’

“Then Abraham said, ‘If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone should rise from the dead.’”⁴

Lord, Send Us Your Spirit

In my twenty-some years of practicing law, I was never in court as a lawyer. Never filed a complaint. Never argued a motion. My arenas were conference rooms and closing tables. Now, here I am in court.

I have been subpoenaed to testify in the lawsuit about the summer heat on Florida’s death row. Not too many people walk around back there. Who else can they call to provide onsite experience of the grueling effects of incessant Florida summer heat and moisture on the human constitution?

While waiting my turn in the last row of the courtroom’s wooden pews, I imagine the questions that might be asked. “Probably they will start with:

How hot is it?"

"Sounds like the lead in for a bad joke on the old *Tonight Show*," I chuckle to myself. "The answer might sound like a bad punch line."

Is it okay to say "as hot as I thought hell would be, but with higher humidity" on the witness stand in a federal court? Probably not. But I cannot give temperatures. I am not allowed to carry a thermometer around the prison.

Maybe I should describe how, in all the towns surrounding that prison, cows are dropping dead on the farms in droves. Outside temperatures have been hitting a hundred or higher with humidity in the high 90s.

It is a lot hotter than the **tourist temperature**. That is what everyone calls the official temperature from Jacksonville, which seems geared to convincing northern tourists that it is safe to come on down to Florida. Those readings do not appear related at all to the physical environment in a concrete and steel box—with no air conditioning, shade or air movement—in the middle of a former cow pasture in rural Florida.

My mental gymnastics are curtailed by the jolting testimony of a death row inmate who has taken the stand. He is 50-ish and has been asked to describe the physical effects of the heat. He testifies that he has been filing grievances about the summer heat for almost ten years. He is required to take psychotropic medications that have instructions to avoid excessive heat. He describes dizziness. Disorientation. Confusion. Palpitations. Nausea. Vomiting. Blood pressure irregularities. Breathing difficulties. Heat and stress induced sleep disorders. He has passed out and split his head open against the metal sink in his cell.

Can we believe our ears? Is anybody listening? I look around the room. How are people responding to this?

To my right is a group of escort officers from the death row prison, listening attentively and solemnly. They have probably been in those wings in July and August. They know what it is like to be in that heat for just thirty or forty minutes, let alone to live in it.

Suddenly a pert young woman seated about three rows in front of them stands up and turns her back to the witness stand. Her crisp blue suit and badge give her away as a government agent of some kind. She has obviously heard enough. Her meticulously coifed blonde hair swirls to catch up with the rotation of her perfectly exercised body, as she gestures towards the

officers. Sneering sharply, with eyes rolling and nostrils flaring in a snort, she sarcastically signifies her dehumanization of the man on the witness stand.

The officers try to act as though they did not see her. I saw her. I am aghast.

This is our response to human agony?

This is our spirit in the face of relievable human suffering created by us, our man-made torment for those controlled and dominated by us?

Lord, save us from our hearts of stone. Cast out from us this dark spirit and give us hearts of flesh.

Lord, please, send us your Spirit.

The social justice teaching of the Catholic Church does have political implications, but it is far more than simply political. The foundational notion of *solidarity* recognizes that we are all responsible for each other as members of the human family. This is closely linked with *subsidiarity*, which focuses our problem solving efforts on the most basic community level possible. These principles of Catholic social justice teaching introduce a *relational* aspect to our understanding of our duty to those who are suffering. Relationship implies commitment. Reflecting upon Jesus' description of the Last Judgment, then Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, now known as Pope Francis, emphasizes this aspect of Jesus' teaching:

In Christianity, the attitude we must have toward the poor is, in its essence, that of true commitment. And [Jesus] added something else: this commitment must be person to person, in the flesh. It is not enough to mediate this commitment through institutions.... They do not excuse us from our obligation of establishing personal contact with the needy.... Those in prison must be visited.... It is terribly difficult for me to go to a prison because of the harshness of life there. But I go anyway, because the Lord wants me to be there in the flesh, alongside those in need, in poverty, in pain.... We cannot accept the underlying idea that we who are doing well give something to those who

are doing badly, but they should stay that way, far away from us. That is not Christian.⁵

Our touchstone for the social justice framework for credible and responsible prison ministry is the year 2000 Statement of the Catholic Bishops of the United States, *Responsibility, Rehabilitation and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice*.⁶ The statement challenges us to break out of political paradigms that offer only false or extreme solutions and, instead, to see that crime demands not only punishment and accountability but also rehabilitation and restoration. Crime victims deserve our best efforts toward healing and restoration. And our communities deserve preservation of the common good and restoration of the harm done.

[A] Catholic approach does not give up on those who violate these laws. We believe that both victims and offenders are children of God. Despite their very different claims on society, their lives and dignity should be protected and respected. We seek justice, not vengeance. We believe punishment must have clear purposes; protecting society and rehabilitating those who violate the law.⁷

As Catholics, we are mindful that the Jesus Christ of Scripture allowed himself to be incarcerated as an inmate. In Jesus' description of the Great Judgment, he told us that when we visit the least of our brethren in prison, we visit him. The Good Samaritan in the Gospel (Luke 10:25-37) chose compassionately to inconvenience himself and spend his own money in order to bring healing and restoration to a victim of crime. And the Gospel story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) reminds us all that we are to rejoice and celebrate the repentance and reformation of the evildoer, rather than stand in resentment like the elder brother that Jesus described. This comprehensive understanding of the problems of crime and justice in our society is rooted in the mission of the Church. It also requires us to squarely face a fundamental question: are prisoners human beings?

Are Prisoners Human Beings?

We have already synthesized a foundational moral principle: Apathy in the face of relievable human suffering is radical evil.

That maxim begs a deeper question: Are prisoners human beings?

If prisoners are not human beings, then apathy in the face of their suffering may be morally permissible. Put differently, the question may be asked: Does one lose his or her status as a human being by virtue of incarceration? The Bible teaches that every human being is made in the image and likeness of God.⁸

Then God said: Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness.... God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.
Genesis 1:26-27

It is clear, therefore, for people of biblical faith (and the Catholic faith is profoundly biblical) that every inmate started out in the image and likeness of God. In other words, each inmate began as a human being.

Thus, we may refine our question as follows: Do felons lose their status as human beings by virtue of their conviction and incarceration?

We can look for guidance in our answer to the words of Pope Paul VI given in his address at Boy's Town in Rome, January 1, 1972:⁹

And there is another justice which concerns man's nature itself: the justice that wants every man to be treated as a man.... Every man has his dignity, an inviolable dignity: woe betide anyone who touches it! It matters not whether he is little or great, poor or rich, white or black. Every man has his rights and duties, because of which he deserves to be treated as a person. Indeed, we Christians say that every man is our brother. He must be treated as a brother: that means he must be loved.... The smaller, the poorer, the more suffering, the more defenseless, even the lower a man has fallen, the more he deserves to be assisted, raised up, cared for, and honored. We learn this from the Gospel.... This is justice!¹⁰

Could this dignity of the human person of which Pope Paul VI is speaking

even reside with those who have committed horrible crimes?

It certainly seems so, especially based upon the words of Pope John Paul II:

A sign of hope is the increasing recognition that the dignity of human life must never be taken away, even in the case of someone who has done great evil.¹¹

This is the second step in our effort to determine the moral parameters for punishment of prisoners: Inmates in prisons are human beings and retain their right to be treated with the dignity of a human person, made in the image and likeness of God.

The principle that every human being is made in the image and likeness of God found in Genesis 1:26-27 is referred to as the *imago Dei* (image of God). The Catholic understanding of human dignity simply recognizes the *imago Dei* as a reality that must be incorporated into our choices and our policies.

Given the facts that prisoners are human beings and justice requires that we are to love them, what is our response to the suffering of those who are incarcerated?

As I Have Loved You

To address the moral nature of punishment, its purposes and limitations in our first-world American society: *First*, we synthesized a foundational moral principle: Apathy in the face of relievable human suffering is radical evil.

Next, we determined that prisoners are human beings, made in the image and likeness of God and that such human dignity must never be taken away from them, even in the case of someone who has done great evil.

And, through the words of Pope Paul VI, we understand the practical ramification that prisoners, even those who have fallen to the depths, must

be loved, and that doing so is justice.

The next step in our inquiry is obvious: it is the basic question “what is love?”

Our attempt to fashion an answer from Scripture faces an immediate dilemma. There are three root words for love in the Greek: *erōs*, *philia*, and *agapē*.¹²

We commonly think of *erōs* as being sexual in nature, as meant in the word erotic. Some scholars, however, point out that the essence of *erōs* is its conditional nature: I only give if I get. The object of this love is a thing used for my gratification. Thus, I can *erōs* (love) pasta or *erōs* (love) my girlfriend. When either ceases to gratify me, I do not love it or her anymore. It is by nature conditional and self-interested.

Philia also has a commonly understood meaning: brotherly or sisterly love. That is the root of the name Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love. *Philia* is most like friendship.

The term *agapē* is much tougher to pin down. We usually start by distinguishing it from the other two, by describing what it is *not*.¹³ It is a love that is not conditional and is much broader and deeper in scope than the solidarity among brothers and sisters in the same boat. The word *agapē* is even used to describe the nature of God’s love for us. Sometimes the word “charity” is used to translate *agapē*, especially when the Scriptures are talking about giving alms or caring for the poor. But charity, in our way of thinking, is a vastly different love than the kind I have for my children, church members, or next-door neighbors.

The essence of *agapē* seems to be the lack of any requirement for reciprocity. This love is love just because it is.¹⁴

All three Greek words are translated into English as love. Which kind of love is the love that every person deserves, even those who have fallen into the depths? Which kind of love is the love of justice? What is the love we Christians are called to live out with our fellow man, including prisoners?

Erōs does not appear in the Greek New Testament. Not even once. Out of the over 300 times that the words for love appear in the Greek New Testament, the word *philia* is used less than 30 times. The other times, the word for love is *agapē*.¹⁵

In the critical passages from the Gospel of John, where the teaching of

Jesus becomes so revolutionary as to use himself, his life, and his deeds as the definition for love, The Savior commands us to love one another as he has loved us.¹⁶ The word used for love in the Greek text of John's Gospel below is *agapē*:

I give you a new commandment: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

John 13:34-35

Moreover, this Christian disinterested love precludes retaliation for offenses.¹⁷ It has been said that based upon the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, the best definition of *agapē* is the willingness to suffer without the desire to get even; the willingness to serve without the desire for anything in return, not even gratitude.¹⁸

We are honing in on the core issue, the difference between love and revenge. The New Testament Scriptures forbid one and command the other. We better know the difference between the two.

What is the difference between love and vengeance?

In the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* we are reminded that “God, in Christ, redeems not only the individual person but also the social relations existing between men.” [¶52]¹⁹ The *Compendium* further explains that the Church's mission of redemption extends to every aspect of the social plane, transforming all human relationships. [¶53] The very model of Trinitarian love becomes “the basis of the meaning and value of the person, of social relations, of human activity in the world.” [¶54] And this mission of transformation is a not just a historical need, but is a “fundamental requirement of our time, as well.” [¶55] The promised justice of the new earth that fills Christian hope is the ultimate restoration in and through Jesus Christ of our social relations.²⁰

The good things—such as human dignity, brotherhood and freedom, all the good fruits of nature and of human enterprise—that in the Lord’s Spirit and according to his command have spread throughout the earth, having been purified of every stain, illuminated and transfigured, belong to the Kingdom of truth and life, of holiness and grace, of justice, of love, and of peace that Christ will present to the Father, and it is there that we shall once again find them. The words of Christ in their solemn truth will then resound for all people: “Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.... As you did it to one of the least of my brethren, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:34-36,40). [¶57]

Prominent in the social justice and catechetical traditions of the Catholic Church is the role of personal relationships in mediating this fulfillment of the human person.

Being conformed to Christ and contemplating his face instill in Christians an irrepressible longing for a foretaste in this world, in the context of human relationships, of what will be a reality in the definitive world to come; thus Christians strive to give food, drink, clothing, shelter, care, a welcome and company to the Lord who knocks at the door (cf. Matthew 25:35-37). [¶58]

Consequently, for the Catholic prison ministry volunteer, the mission is always much broader and much deeper than what is simply apparent in the moment. He or she is in fact always embarked upon a mission of evangelization that enfleshes the Gospel in every corner of society and in every circumstance. As the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* relates, this means “infusing into the human heart the power of meaning and freedom found in the Gospel in order to promote a society befitting mankind because it befits

Christ: It means building a city of man that is more human because it is in greater conformity with the Kingdom of God.” [¶63]

There is no problem of mission creep in this deep understanding of evangelization. Moreover, the elevation of our natural human and social relationships to the higher plane of the supernatural is simply the faithful living out of that mission.

Every time Catholic volunteers enter the close of a prison or detention facility, they do so in order to overcome the sin-laden futility of the fallen world, to deliver the Good News of the Incarnation to those subject to incarceration, to proclaim to them that God’s love is all-present and all-powerful here and now, even for those inside the barbed wire fences:

Man is touched by this love in the fullness of his being: a being that is corporeal and spiritual, that is in a solidary relationship with others. The whole man—not a detached soul or a being closed within its own individuality, but a person and a society of persons—is involved in the salvific economy of the Gospel. [¶65]

In *Christifideles Laici*, Pope John Paul II emphasizes the significance of this aspect of the Church’s mission:

To rediscover and make others rediscover the inviolable dignity of every human person makes up an essential task, in a certain sense, the central and unifying task of the service which the Church, and lay faithful in her, are called to render to the human family.²¹

This key principle in Catholic social doctrine is the God-given dignity of human life.

The fundamental starting point for all of Catholic social teaching is the defense of human life and dignity: Every human person is created in the image and likeness of God and has an inviolable dignity, value, and worth.... Therefore, both the

most wounded victim and the most callous criminal retain their humanity.²²

Vengeance Is Not Ours

In developing our inquiry into the moral nature of punishment, its purposes and limitations in our first world American society, we have addressed several critical issues:

- ✦ Apathy in the face of relievable human suffering is radical evil.
- ✦ Popes Paul VI and John Paul II tell us that prisoners are human beings, made in the image and likeness of God.
- ✦ Such human dignity must never be taken away, even in the case of someone who has done great evil.
- ✦ Even those who have fallen to the depths must be loved, and doing so is justice.
- ✦ Jesus defines love for us by commanding us to love one another as He loved us.

How does punishment fit into this template? Are there to be no consequences for wrongs committed against society and its members? Can punishment be loving?

We begin our search for answers to such questions with paragraph 2266 of *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*. The text tells us that the state's duty to safeguard the common good of society includes its efforts "to curb the spread of behavior harmful to people's rights and to the basic rules of civil society." Therefore, government has the right and duty to inflict appropriate punishment. Such punishment must be proportionate to the offense committed.

There are no surprises here, except perhaps the shock of how grossly disproportionate some of our punishments are. Poor nonviolent offenders, especially minorities with addictions, can face prison terms of ten, twenty, or more years. Meanwhile, some corporate executives and their high paid professional advisors who have devised schemes to defraud the public,

bankrupting the pensions of their own employees and of untold tens of thousands of investors, receive a slap on the wrist. In some cases, we are told that even though billions of dollars have disappeared, no one can find any law that has been broken.

Mercy for the rich, with the guillotine for the poor, cannot stand in the face of Scripture or Christian Tradition. A system of punishments that are not proportional does not meet the requirements of our faith.

Paragraph 2266 of *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* also tells us that the primary purpose of punishment is “redressing the disorder introduced by the offense.” Based on *Webster’s* definitions, redress means setting things right, compensating for an injury, removing the cause of a grievance or complaint, or avenging a loss or injury by paying retribution. When a crime has been committed, society and the victim have suffered a disorder. The graver the crime, the greater the disorder.

Punishment, therefore, must attempt to set right this disorder—for the victim, society, and perpetrator. This “setting right” can take place through restitution or some other means: e.g., the removal of the perpetrator, the cause of the grievance, from society by confinement in jail or prison.

Retribution can also be part of this concept. The word literally means “to pay back.” Ideally retribution should mean a punishment that compensates society and the victim for their loss. In its current popular usage, however, the word **retribution** has come to mean “revenge,” that is, the vengeance that seeks an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Such retribution is antithetical to Scripture. “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” Romans 12:19 ²³ This position is also unsupported by *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which provides at paragraph 2302:

To desire vengeance in order to do evil to someone who should be punished is illicit, but it is praiseworthy to impose restitution “to correct vices and maintain justice.”

The term used to describe punishment that seeks not revenge but rather seeks to redress the disorder through restitution to and restoration of the community, the victims, and the offender, is **restorative justice**.

Restorative justice is loving punishment.

In our efforts to respond to crime in accordance with the teaching of our Catholic Church, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops suggest that the four elements of the sacrament of Penance (also known as the Sacrament of Confession or Reconciliation) in our sacramental heritage provide a poignant model for our social response to crime and the offender:²⁴

- ✦ **Contrition:** Genuine sorrow, regret, or grief over one's wrongs and a serious resolution not to repeat the wrong.
- ✦ **Confession:** Clear acknowledgment and true acceptance of responsibility for the hurtful behavior.
- ✦ **Satisfaction:** The external sign of one's desire to amend one's life. [e.g., restitution].
- ✦ **Absolution:** After someone has shown contrition, acknowledged his or her sin and offered satisfaction, then Jesus, through the ministry of the priest and in the company of the church community, forgives the sin and welcomes the person back into "communion." (Bracketed language added.)

It is important not to confuse these elements with expectations of an emotional, dewy-eyed, Hollywood-style expression of remorse. Such displays are highly overrated. As will be discussed in *Chapter 8: Characteristics of Criminal Thinking*, any well-practiced psychopath can deliver an academy-award-worthy performance of remorse that means absolutely nothing. Nor is remorse meant to describe the off-handed whimsical gesture that passes culturally as "I'm sorry." The bishops' model requires a "sorrow of the soul and detestation for sin committed, together with the resolution not to sin again."²⁵

Based upon my own experience, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. True remorse, true contrition, is made manifest in the present lived life—not in the way the incarcerated say they will live on the outside someday if they get out of prison. That is wishful thinking. The proof of their change of heart is in the lived life today, while still in prison.

Sometimes the men or women in a prison will tell a volunteer, “You think you know certain prisoners, but day in and day out they are not at all like the way they are in front of you.” No prison ministry volunteer wants to hear that about one of their charges. *Chapter 9: Pastoral Needs of Inmates* deals with the different ways one can respond to such information.

But a prison ministry volunteer will also hear the hoped for reports from the community inside the fence. “That guy who has been coming to your RCIA class has really changed. We all know it. I want what he has. Can I start, too?” Such changes in the choices of a man or woman’s lived life, here and now in prison, is usually a reliable indicator of true contrition.

An integral component of this model is the act of forgiveness. Forgiveness is not a new or recent concept in our Christian response to human injury. In the *Our Father* or *Lord’s Prayer* that Jesus taught his disciples, we pray “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Such a biblical response to human injury based on the teachings of the Christian Scriptures does not allow for human vengeance.

This truth was fully incorporated into the *Catechism of the Council of Trent* (1566) which provides as follows in the teachings concerning murder and the Fifth Commandment:²⁶

Forgiveness of Injuries Commanded: But the most important duty of all, and that which is the fullest expression of charity, and to the practice of which we should most habituate ourselves, is to pardon and forgive from the heart the injuries which we may have received from others. The Sacred Scriptures, as we have already observed, frequently admonish and exhort us to a full compliance with this duty. Not only do they pronounce *blessed* those who do this, but they also declare that God grants pardon to those who really fulfill this duty, while he refuses to pardon those who neglect it, or refuse to obey it.

How to Persuade Men to Forgive Injuries: As the desire of revenge is almost natural to man, it becomes necessary for the pastor to exert his utmost diligence not only to instruct but also earnestly to persuade the faithful that a Christian should forgive and forget injuries; and as this is a duty frequently inculcated by sacred writers, [the priest] should consult them on the subject in order to be able to subdue the pertinacity [perverse stubbornness] of those whose minds are obstinately bent on revenge, and he should have ready the forcible and appropriate arguments which those Fathers piously employed.

Trent's four-hundred-fifty-year-old model does not support punishment and the suffering of incarceration for their own sake, for mere vengeance. Punishment and the suffering of imprisonment must serve a purpose consistent with the principles discussed above, which is why Catholic bishops still teach:²⁷

Punishment by civil authorities for criminal activity should serve three principal purposes:

1. the preservation and protection of the common good of society,
2. the restoration of public order, and
3. the restoration and conversion of the offender.

Pope John Paul II Sets the Stage

The issue of prisons and punishment is among the most burning of our day. For many of the currently imprisoned men and women who came to prison in the 1990s and the 2000s, the society they experienced before incarceration is still their reality for life on the outside. That reality is abysmal.

According to the U.S. Justice Department for 2005, our country's inmate population exceeded two million. One out of every seventy-five men in the

U.S. was behind bars. The national incarceration rate of 715 prisoners for every 100,000 in population was the highest in the world, far surpassing the incarceration rates in England (143), Canada (116), Mexico (169) and even Russia (584).

If we broaden our vision to include Americans who are on probation or parole, the 2005 total was a staggering 6.9 million people.

One out of every thirty-two Americans was under the supervision of a state or federal correctional system.

In the year 2004 alone, 630,000 formerly incarcerated Americans were returned to their home communities. Most had almost no assistance in restarting their lives. Almost all of them were replaced by new admissions to prisons and jails. The implications of this churning cycle affect every corner of our society.

Our democratic institutions are affected. In 48 out of 50 states, inmates found guilty of felonies were prohibited from voting. While some states return the right to vote automatically when one's debt to society has been repaid, as of 2005 an estimated 1.7 million Americans had not regained their right to vote.

Despite this disenfranchisement of the incarcerated, prisoners are included in the census numbers that determine voting districts. In effect, millions of people have been moved from their home voting districts (frequently urban areas) to alien districts (frequently rural areas), shifting political power to those whose interests may be directly adversarial to the inmates' home base.

Also of concern are the hundreds of thousands of inmates nationwide who are in jails awaiting trial or serving time for misdemeanors. These Americans retain their constitutional right to vote. Almost no one, however, can find any system that has been established to facilitate their voting in any election: local, state, or federal.

Our veterans are affected. As of 2005 at least a quarter-million American veterans were currently incarcerated.

Our economic and political institutions are affected. This effect goes far beyond creating a dependency by local economies upon high incarceration rates in order to maintain jobs and essential services.

Prison privatization and the use of prison labor by private enterprise are of growing concern nationally, especially in the South. One study of the year 2000

elections established that prison companies made over \$1.1 million in political contributions in the 14 southern states, targeting state officials involved in criminal justice decisions. American prisons are threatening to become big business. As recent criminal justice experience nationwide evidences, mixing prisons and profit can create a huge potential for conflicts of interest.

Our communities are affected. Most prisoners are from disadvantaged minority communities. That is where they return upon release. The burden of supporting millions of politically and economically disenfranchised Americans falls squarely and unfairly upon the communities with the least resources. While this is a pervasive reality for our inner-city communities, it is no less true with respect to our Native American populations and the horrendous conditions in the jails run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

As American Catholics, we must respond to this crisis.

Pope John Paul II leads our way:

Measures that are simply repressive or punitive...are inadequate for reaching the objective of an authentic recuperation of inmates. Therefore, it is necessary to rethink the situation in prisons in its very foundation and ends.... The dutiful application of justice to defend citizens and public order must not contrast with the due attention to the rights of prisoners and to rehabilitating them.²⁸

The prison ministry volunteer must be aware that the abject reality described by these numbers is the society that still exists in the memories and attitudes of men and women who came to prison ten or more years ago. Unfortunately, the current statistics, which are presented in the next chapter, are not much better. In some cases they are worse.

With its broad, encompassing social justice framework in the background, Catholic prison ministry volunteers must take a deep breath and step across the threshold from the “free” world into the island police state known as a prison or jail. In our next chapter, we will look at the ecclesial and catechetical practices that our Church provides to equip us for this work.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

For over twenty years, layman Dale Recinella (generally known as “Brother Dale” by the inmates he serves) has been an outside chaplain in prison ministry handling general population and every category of special confinement, including medical and psychiatric units and cell-front ministry in long-term solitary confinement and death row as well as deathwatch spiritual counseling in Florida’s death house. He is a certified Catholic Correctional Chaplain serving under the Bishop of St. Augustine and the Pastor of St. Mary’s Mother of Mercy Parish in Macclenny, Florida.

Chaplain Recinella is a licensed Florida lawyer and graduate of University of Notre Dame Law School and had a successful career in the financial industry before leaving to do prison ministry full time. He holds a Master’s in Theological Studies in Catholic Pastoral Theology from Ave Maria University, Naples, Florida, and has supervised pastoral internships in prison ministry for candidates for Catholic priesthood and the permanent diaconate. Dale has taught the course in “Credible and Effective Ministry in Prison and Detention Settings” for the Pastoral Certification Program at Saint Leo’s University, Tampa, Florida. His ministry work has received numerous recognitions, including the Humanitarian Award from the Franciscan Alumni Association and, at the request of the Catholic Bishops of Florida, the 2016 Holy Cross *Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice*, the highest papal honor a lay person can receive in the Catholic Church, for distinguished service to the Church.

After living for seventeen years in Macclenny, Florida, just fifteen miles from death row, Dale and his wife, Susan, now reside in Tallahassee and are members of Good Shepherd Catholic Church. Brother Dale still ministers at death row and in the death house, making the 2.5-hour commute to Starke, Florida, weekly. Susan, who for fourteen years has served as his partner to minister to the families of the condemned (while Dale is witnessing at the execution for the inmate), continues to serve in that role as often as possible. They have five adult children and numerous grandchildren.

A COMPREHENSIVE HANDBOOK FOR CATHOLICS CALLED TO PRISON MINISTRY

Most of us want to forget about human beings who have been incarcerated in our prisons and jails. We are now “safe” and “they” are out of sight and therefore out of mind. Not so **Dale Recinella**, a former Wall Street finance lawyer who felt called to “visit Jesus in prison,” as he describes prison ministry. He has no illusions about the difficulties of doing prison ministry, especially in prisons where there is strong prejudice against Catholics on the part of some inmates, prison staff, and even other ministers.



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When We Visit Jesus in Prison combines Catholic Church teaching, the best in current sociological and psychological thinking on incarceration, and the reflections and stories of a trained and certified Catholic layman who has been doing prison ministry for over twenty years after leaving a successful career as a lawyer in the financial industry. Recinella is the recipient of the Holy Cross *Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice* from Pope Francis, the highest papal honor a lay person can receive in the Catholic Church, presented to him by the Catholic Bishops of Florida in 2016.

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