



ADOREMUS 2018

Symposium Presentation

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the ministry of the eucharist in hospitals and prisons

Breaking Bread Behind Bars

There is something very real and tangible about faith in prison! May I begin by furnishing you with some facts! Currently, there are over 83,000 prisoners in England and Wales held in over 120 prisons – Males and females, young and old, juvenile and youth! Of the many and different religions that prisoners ascribe to, over 68 recognised religions, the highest number of prisoners would consider themselves to be Roman Catholic. A total of almost fourteen and a half thousand! Figures that would disabuse anyone of the notion that Catholics are somehow more immune than the rest of the population from committing criminal offences. “There are many, many Catholic people who find themselves in prison.”

Serving the Prison population there are over 250 Roman Catholic Chaplains some working full time in prison ministry, others part time and some in a voluntary capacity; Priests, Deacons, Religious Brothers, Religious Sisters and Lay people. In addition to this, supporting the prison chaplains, there are a myriad of chaplaincy volunteers – members of the local parish communities who assist the chaplain at mass, in catechetical and bible study classes and some who become “Official Prison Visitors” – visiting socially prisoners, especially those who are without family or friends to visit them.

I was very conscious when preparing for this workshop, that it is very easy for any one of those 250 Chaplains, like myself, or one of the many chaplaincy volunteers to describe the significance of the Eucharist within the prison setting. However, what we as Chaplains and volunteers feel we are offering can be very different from what a prisoner may either need or experience! Within this context everything that is presented to you this afternoon is very much a result of consultation with currently serving prisoners – prisoners for whom, chaplaincy, the chaplain and what they provide is critical.

The Presence of the Eucharist

Some years ago, when I began as a full-time prison chaplain, I was very fortunate to find that in the prison that I was to minister in, which was built some decades before, there had been incorporated into the prison Chapel, a Roman Catholic Blessed Sacrament Chapel. Moreover, the prison was erected at a time when the provision of Chaplaincy was given an extremely high priority, therefore the Chapel itself

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was positioned at the very heart of the prison. Unfortunately, as there had not been a full-time priest chaplain for some time, the Blessed Sacrament Chapel was unused! It was a tremendous privilege that one of my first tasks, as the new Roman Catholic Chaplain, was to once more reserve the presence of the Lord in the Blessed Sacrament, not only in the Chapel, but at the very heart of the prison. The presence of the Blessed Sacrament was to become visibly and spiritually a clear sign to the whole prison community – prisoner, officer and civilian staff alike – that at the heart of the institution was the presence of God whose love reached beyond that which the very institution stood for! In the Blessed Sacrament, Christ was present to the prison community who have, to all intents and purposes, been cut off from the world. No wall or bars can ever prevent the Lord from being present to his people.

In his prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, Saint Alphonsus, speaks of the Eucharist as being 'Full of compassion and of love, awaiting, calling and welcoming all those who come to visit'. What Saint Alphonsus spoke of in the 18th century, it would appear, takes on greater significance in the prison setting. In the many prison chapels, where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved, prisoner, chaplain and staff alike are not only reminded but are able to experience the presence of a compassionate and forgiving Lord.

Celebration of the Eucharist

Not every prison in England and Wales is fortunate to have reservation of the Blessed Sacrament, however, every prison is fortunate to have regular celebration of mass – fortunately, the weekly celebration of mass is enshrined in prison law. Having already mentioned that many of the catholic prison chaplains are not priests, it is only with the assistance and generosity of diocesan and religious priests, local to the prison, that this is possible. For the Roman Catholic Prisoner the celebration of Mass is a lifeline! In the 2016 research document "Belief and Belonging", commissioned by the Bishops of England and Wales, which looked into spiritual and pastoral role of Catholic chaplains for Catholic prisoners, a common theme was that in the celebration of the Eucharist – at Mass, the prisoner no longer feels like a prisoner but simply a member of the Church. Over and over again, prisoners make comments such as:-

"I have never missed a single Mass since I entered custody and my whole week is based on that service. It is my lifeline and entering the chapel is the one time you forget you are in prison. It allows you peace, to worship, to sing and praise...It renews, refreshes and revives your spirit. It is my favourite time of each week."

"Coming to prison has made me feel that I no longer belong to society. I feel an outcast and had been remorseful ever since and still am. Attending Mass gives me the feeling of belonging and being part of a small community. It gives me the feeling of salvation."

These comments from Belief and Belonging were mirrored recently when speaking to some young offenders who said:

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“Mass is the only time in the week that I feel normal”,

“When I come to mass I don’t feel like a prisoner”,

“The volunteers that come in for mass show me that people care”

The list is endless; however, the prisoners themselves identified in and through their comments a number of themes that have deep significance when we speak about the Eucharist. Unity, mission, universality, forgiveness and hope, – all experienced by prisoners in and through the Eucharist.

Unity in the Eucharist

I was taken aback recently when a prisoner spoke to me of how Mass in prison is more realistic! He went on to describe how his experience of the Eucharistic Celebration, prior to being sentenced was ‘passive’. He was of an age that he had attended mass before the reforms of the Second Vatican Council and as such had become accustomed to slipping into and out of mass without ever becoming involved. For him, the Celebration of the Eucharist in prison was an eye opener – it was transformative! He beautifully described how, by coming to prison, he had been afforded the opportunity of been returned to that which Jesus instituted at the last supper. He said:

“Once the royal courts had been transformed in to locations more physically related to that upper room, where Jesus sat amid a group of his fellows, only hours before he was arrested, more active participation, guided by purposeful leadership, as at the Last Supper, became hugely significant in the context of the prison chapel”

It is in the context of the prison chapel that people of different cultures, backgrounds, languages are brought together. There is no pretence that those present are sinless and holy. All stand as sinners, equally before God. Whatever the prisoner’s background, be it wealth, poverty, mental health issues, childhood abuse, learnt behaviour – the weekly celebration of Mass is an opportunity for unity. The Eucharist unites the community at prayer so that we all become more fully ‘one body in Christ’.

Much like any parish there are many occasions when because of sickness there are prisoners who are unable to attend the chapel, or it might be that they are located in the ‘prison hospital’ or are separated for safety or because of their behaviour. In these cases communion is taken to them by the chaplain, a further example of how the Eucharist unites the community – when a prisoner receives communion on the wing or in healthcare, or wherever he or she is located, they are united with the Eucharistic Community and in that moment of grace they are assured of the prayers of the worshiping community not only in the prison but throughout the world.

Mission through the Eucharist

For the prisoner, especially the “unchurched”, the commitment that Roman Catholic prisoners make to attending weekly Mass is very much a source of intrigue. Roman Catholic prisoners and chaplains

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alike are often 'interrogated' by prisoners from other or no religious background. The confines of a prison community serve to highlight the differences in religious practice. This intrigue, questioning and recognition often lead to a desire to attend Mass – to explore that which some of their peers find so important. It is this desire that proffers the opportunity for a prisoner, who may be searching for meaning, to find that Christ-like welcome that is offered in the Eucharistic Celebration. The non catholic prisoner often recognises something that we might take for granted. In the Eucharistic Celebration, in doing that which Jesus asked of his followers at the last supper, in partaking of the one bread and one cup there is an affinity that is distinct and tangible – we are brothers and sisters in Christ.

The immediate response I received from a prisoner, whom I spoke with as a means of preparation for today, was the description of an Easter Mass in Prison, at which I was the celebrant, some years ago. I was able to recall the celebration but was oblivious to the significance of what had happened. Shortly after the mass began, a governor slipped into the back of the chapel and participated in the remainder of the mass. I thought nothing of this until this prisoner highlighted the fact that the governor had come up for communion last of all, that he had received from the chalice (which, as an aside, was being administered by a prisoner who had been commissioned as a special minister) and in so doing demonstrated that he was an equal around the table of the Lord. The prisoner then went on to describe how, despite the fact that many of them had contagious diseases, he still received from the same cup as they did. In his words "I was blown away by his humility!"

Universality of Eucharist

In that story you may have been surprised to discover that in some prisons the prisoners receive at communion both the sacred host and the precious blood at Mass. Some years ago at a Roman Catholic Prison Chaplains Conference, a bishop who was present highlighted that the experience of Church that a prisoner receives should be no different to that which a parishioner experiences in the parish – they are equally part of the Universal Church. With this in mind, it is imperative that the Eucharistic Celebration which a prisoner encounters in prison is akin to that which any member of the Eucharistic Community will experience in any Church throughout the world. One way in which many prison chaplains achieve this sense of universality is by inviting members of the local parish community into the prison mass. Some of the observations that prisoners have made about the mass "being the one time in the week they feel normal" are attributed to the contribution that volunteers make to the weekly Eucharistic Celebration in prison. Welcoming and greeting the prisoners as they arrive, providing music accompaniment and simply being a praying presence are all ways in which Christ is present in the Eucharistic Celebration. Moreover, this semblance of 'normality', in the words of a prisoner, "is a reminder of how life could be in the future on release".



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Forgiveness in the Eucharist

It is this non-judgemental atmosphere experienced in and through the Eucharistic Community within prison that has prominence. The Eucharist, Christ giving us his very self, was a means of our being reconciled to the father. The Christ we encounter in the scriptures was one who opened his arms of welcoming forgiveness to the sinner. In the Eucharist, the living presence of Christ in our world today, we experience the same open arms of welcome and forgiveness. My thoughts revert to a liturgy we celebrated in prison for the Year of Mercy. Every Roman Catholic prisoner in the prison received a personal invitation to this celebration of mercy and the response was phenomenal; many who had not practiced their faith for years embraced the opportunity to experience the mercy of the Father. The celebration consisted of blessing the door of the chapel, symbolic of the Holy Doors that were opened throughout the world, and then in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament exposed there was the opportunity, with a number of priests present, to individually celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation. The celebration concluded with Benediction with the Blessed Sacrament to small groups of prisoners, emulating that which happens during the procession and blessing of the sick at Lourdes. This opportunity was for many the only encounter they had had with our Lord through the sacraments since childhood. The presence of Christ in the Eucharist in the prison chapel that day was transformational; all in equal measure, from the weekly mass attendees to those who had never seen the inside of a church since baptism, entered into the presence of the Lord with respect, all embraced this merciful opportunity and, in the words of Saint Alphonsus, rediscovered a God who is 'full of compassion and of love, awaiting, calling and welcoming all those who come to visit'.

If an experience of the Eucharistic 'inside' were to play any part in leading to a better life 'outside' it lives up to the message in John's gospel that "the bread of life gives life to the world". Christ's call to 'do this in memory of me' has ever greater significance when we remember that this 'call' was spoken by a 'man' who would not only be arrested and convicted but sentenced to death on a cross – one who understands, because he has firsthand experience, what it is to be a prisoner.