



Apostles for Today

Prayer and Reflection - March 2014

Saint Vincent Pallotti and Evangelisation with Prisoners

In the 1840's, the last decade of his life, Saint Vincent Pallotti intensified his ministry to prisoners, one of the most difficult for a priest. The prisons of Rome at that time were full of ordinary offenders mixed with political prisoners. Ministry to prisoners then was more difficult than today. Firstly, imprisonment increased the anticlerical animosity of members of sects. Then, those found guilty were often condemned to death. It was necessary to work with them, seeking to bring them close to God during their time of imprisonment, helping them in their final hours and accompanying them to the scaffold. Prisoners also insistently asked the chaplains to help their families, to be close to their parents, spouses and children and, then as now, it was above all the poorest who fell into crime and suffered its consequences.

To St. Vincent, visits to prisoners were like drawing back a curtain, allowing him to experience the miseries of the world more firsthand. He perceived the connection between poverty and delinquency. Gregory XVI created trade schools to rehabilitate young prisoners in order to avoid them falling back into crime, and St. Vincent held various courses of spiritual exercises for the juvenile prisoners of via Giulia and the Baths of Diocletian. During the 1840's Pallotti himself asked to take care of prisoners on a more ongoing basis. He was in fact the first priest to celebrate Mass and hear confessions in the Carcere Nuovo in via Giulia. Then he was asked to the military prison and the house of correction at Ripa Grande and that of Castel Sant'Angelo. Here he discovered that there was no chapel and obtained permission from the Pontifical authorities to adapt a room for this purpose (OCCX, pp. 19-20).

When he developed the system of Procuras, Pallotti assigned the care of prisoners to the eighth Procura, under the protection of Saint

Bartholomew. Its members were to take care of the needs of prisoners in all their dimensions, which included spiritual care, physical needs such as food, the defence of their rights and the seeking of remission for good behaviour, including supplying lawyers, and they also concerned themselves with the families of prisoners. On July 22nd 1845, for instance, Pallotti himself wrote to the Pontifical military leadership to intercede for Luigi Berna, a young military policeman who had already spent 6 months in prison for deserting while drunk to go to see his sick mother, and for Giuseppe Belardi, a 17 year old fusilier who had already spent 5 months in jail for what Pallotti maintained was a false accusation against him by 3 corporals (OCL 5, pp. 101-2).

He also began to be sought for the painful task of giving priestly assistance to those condemned to death. The arch-confraternity of Mercy of San Giovanni Decollato had attended the condemned in Rome since the late 1400s. According to its Registers of the Executed, between 1835 and 1846 Pallotti was asked to come to nine condemned prisoners who remained unrepentant, in two cases despite even the efforts of such saintly priests as Bernardo Clausi and Biagio Valentini. In seven of these, he had the joy of seeing the prisoner's conversion.

A final interesting point regarding Pallotti and prisoners is that Saint Vincent obviously viewed prisoners not simply as passive recipients of the charity and apostolate of others, but as called in their own right to be active apostles in the apostolate of the Church, as is clear from his inclusion of prisoners in the list of possible members of the newly-founded Union of Catholic Apostolate which he outlined between the summers of 1835 and 1836 (cf. OCCC IV, pp. 182 and 326).

Every member of the Union is called to discern and exercise their own particular charisms, is called to an intense union with Christ and to proclaim the Gospel and make the person of Christ known. The context of this is the obvious weakness of human beings and, for this reason, it must be done with an attitude of deep solidarity, emphasising in a particular way the hope offered by the Christian message. The proclamation must be done through experiences of faith which unite Word, Sacrament and the living witness of charity, keeping in mind that Christ had a particular love for the poor. These aspects bring out how the prison is a place of particular evangelisation.

During his visit to the juvenile prison of Casal del Marmo on January 6th 1980, John Paul II underlined that working in prison "is a delicate and difficult but necessary task, which demands self-forgetfulness and strong commitment", taking care of people, because every human person corresponds to a thought of God. In this sense, every human being is fundamentally good and is made for happiness, given that the mission of Christ is directed in the first place to people's inner life.

Cardinal Martini posed the question of what should be done in the concrete and what paths should be identified in order to care for people's wounded dignity? Above all, continually educate the Christian community regarding the fact that human dignity comes before everything else and is above everything else. In drawing near to prisoners, we must never presume ourselves to be just, but rather, conscious of our own sins, we must put ourselves on the same level. It is necessary to help them to find their own dignity once more behind their masks, because behind these we find the face of the human person, and in that face is the image of God and all human dignity.

In the last three years I have been able to meet young men of the juvenile prison of Airola in the province of Benevento. I was accompanied by other Sisters and some young people, in order that we might touch with our own hands the harsh reality of young people chained up by their own egos, and of a society which often deceives and disappoints, living by the law of the strongest. We entered into relationship with them through catechesis, liturgy, listening, playing, workshops and theatrical performances. Our experience with them has taught me that each one of us imprisons himself or herself whenever we fail to search for the potential, the gifts, that God has given us and, if we do not free our hearts through love, we do not succeed in seeing the light of hope and of true freedom. Looking at the faces of these young men, I felt only love and compassion, never judgement, because in every person is the truth of their own being which is that of a Child of God and of a brother or sister who needs to be accompanied to being reborn in new life. Their being there is a cry for help to all of society, which is called to meet a lost humanity, slave of its own sin and of wrong choices, a society must have in its heart the desire to rebuild, beginning from

these failures, in order to create oases of peace, of love, and of values to be rediscovered and to spread in order to nourish faith and hope. And we, as children of Pallotti, must feel our duty to collaborate in the evangelisation of this environment, of proposing and carrying out a pastoral programme directed towards recovering three values which express the dignity of the human person: conscience, freedom and love, in order that there be inclusion, recovery, of these our brothers and sisters who are in need of coming to know and encounter Salvation.

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Questions for personal and community reflection:

- What is our attitude to those in prison? Are we judgemental, self-righteous, harsh? Do we see prisoners as our brothers and sisters with whom Christ has identified himself very particularly?
- Do we pray for prisoners, for their families, for those who work in prisons, for those who have been victims of crime?
- In what practical ways can we reach out to those in prison: through visits, letters, supporting family members of prisoners? In what ways are we called to work for a more just and compassionate society and address causes of crime?

Prayer:

We pray to you, O Christ, who identified yourself with the least of your brothers and sisters in prison, and who before your death tasted the bitterness of imprisonment. Be close to all prisoners, to their families, to those working in prison and to victims of crime, and let them experience your infinite love for them. Heal the wounds that they carry within themselves, set them free from all that imprisons their hearts, revive their faith, restore their hope, rekindle their love, so that they may bear witness to you and become active and authentic apostles of your kingdom of justice and peace, of compassion and mercy, of joy and truth and life. Amen.