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*"Let the holiness of God shine forth" (cf. Mt 5, 16)*

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item 330

### St Vincent Pallotti's prison ministry

In the 1840's, the last decade of his life, St 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.

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.

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 St 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.

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.

**Anna Simeone csac – Ostia Lido – ITALY**  
**02.03.14**

item 331

## **You're doing 'life', Father**

Today I celebrated Mass for the last time in prison. For the past 22 years I have been working as a Prison Chaplain in Western Australian jails. The prisoners used say to me: *"You're doing 'life', Father, just like some of us!"* But now I realise that God is calling me to take a different path and leave this ministry to others.

I feel immensely grateful for all the blessings God has given me over these years. It's been such a privilege to walk with so many prisoners a little of their journey to God. I have been entrusted with so many secrets of the heart, confessions of guilt, experiences of anguish, loss and self-hatred. There is nothing they have confessed to me which in some shape or form I have not myself experienced. Indeed if I had grown up in a



home where there was violence and abuse, perhaps I would be wearing green like them!

Much of my time as a Prison Chaplain has been spent building relationships of trust with both staff and prisoners. I was aware that many of the prisoners were very damaged people who had known great sadness and deprivation earlier on in their lives. I tried to help them see that God does not write them off as “*crims*” or “*scum*” but sees them as a beloved son or daughter. No matter what they had done to hurt others, no matter what others had done to hurt them, God believes in them. God wants to forgive them, mend broken relationships, and help them to be there for those who love them. There is a part of them which simply wants to be accepted for who they truly are – someone who is able to love and deserving to be loved.

I was often touched by the courage of people who were prepared to own up to their offences and the damage they had done to the victims of their crimes. They needed that very much, the chance to grieve over all that had gone wrong in their life, to let go of self-hatred and the need to punish themselves endlessly.

You see people in a very different light when they tell you something of what they have lived through. It has made me realise that God is at work in every one of us and that the most powerful thing any of us has to share is our own story. Because our story is ultimately the story of what God is doing in us.

Working with prisoners has been for me an uplifting and rewarding experience. I loved especially the Restorative Justice workshops where victims of crime came into the prison to share the trauma they had suffered, encouraging prisoners to “fess up” and accept responsibility for their offences.

I loved also the Masses I celebrated with the prisoners. It was an opportunity for them to share their reflections on the Scriptures and how and where they had met Jesus on their own journey. There was such an honesty and earthiness about the story of their addiction to alcohol or drugs, their underlying sense of worthlessness and how they came to discover “Amazing Grace”. There were of course times when I felt dispirited. In prisons there is often an undercurrent of deep frustration and rage. There is a lot of bullying, gang violence and drug dealing. For vulnerable young prisoners especially, jail can be a harsh and de-humanising experience. Yet even in this darkest of situations the Light is never extinguished.

Leaving the Prison Ministry I am conscious that prisons are more overcrowded than ever, putting great strain on staff and prisoners alike. Aboriginal prisoners are hugely over-represented in the prison population. Much needs to be done to provide alternatives to imprisonment for the mentally ill, the addicts, those who have unpaid fines, etc. Rather than building more prisons, the emphasis needs to be on building communities where the most vulnerable are supported, where conflicts are resolved through dialogue between victims and offenders and their families.

None of us walk alone. In my case I have had great encouragement from a little group of lay Catholics

meeting at the Christian Centre for Social Action each Wednesday evening. There we would reflect on the following Sunday's Gospel and talk about what it meant for us and what God was doing in our lives. I have felt held and carried by this little group over the years and inspired by their passion for justice and compassion for the poor.

Over the years I have been greatly supported also by Lay Volunteers who would come into the Prison Chapel with me on a Sunday for Mass and share a cuppa with the prisoners afterwards.

I also owe a lot to a wise and caring woman who was my Pastoral Supervisor for much of my time as a Chaplain. I could *"unload"* onto her my concerns and frustrations and gain insight into myself, my own ambivalence, woundedness and blockages.

It seems to me that many prisoners are hostages to defeat and shame long before they come into jail. They inhabit an inner prison of loneliness and failure. And as we know from our own experience, *"hurt people hurt people"*.

I think of an older prisoner who had come through a period of deep depression. He was greatly loved by his wife and family. He told me how finally he felt able to forgive himself for the shameful things he had done and the trauma he had inflicted on others. Somehow other prisoners sensed the change in him. He found that men who presented such an image of macho toughness to their mates were coming to him for help, crying like children over long-withheld grievances. I have been privileged to witness many such graced moments.



In particular, I have been brought to an experience of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. As Pope Francis has reminded us, Jesus stank of His sheep. What else would you smell of when you are forever searching for lost sheep, picking up the injured and carrying them home?

**Peter Toohey ssc – Perth – AUSTRALIA**  
**17.06.15**  
**courtesy THE FAR EAST [June 2015]**

## sac asia oceania e-bulletin

### you commented...

**on #172** I had the opportunity to be present physically on the auspicious occasion of the honouring of our confrere Father Zbigniew Wasiński with the Order of Merit by the Polish Ambassador to South Korea, His Excellency Krzysztof Ignacy Majka. As one of the two founding members of the Pallottine mission in South Korea, Fr Wasiński really merited this honour in ever respect. Our Society also joins the Polish Ambassador in thanking our confrere for his meritorious service to our Pallottine Family as well as the Church during the last 25 years. The Ambassador, a good Catholic himself, had done his studies in India under the famous scientist and ex President of India, Dr Abdul Kalam and later worked for several years in this country as an engineer. He appeared to be also a humble man with a very fine cultural sensitivity. Publishing this article with the speech of the Ambassador was another way of saying thank you to Fr Wasiński for his person and for his priestly and Pallottine commitment. Please continue your mission as an apostle of the East!

**JN 14.06.15**

Thank you for the news. United in prayers

**IG 14.06.15**

Congratulations Fr Zbigniew on your award and the recognition of your work in Korea. An award well deserved.

**CS 15.06.15**

My prayers and blessings for both of these events. I especially pray for and with Fr. Zbigniew whom I met at the Missionary Formation Conference that was held in the Spirituality Center of St. Vincent Pallotti at Grottaferrata, Italy. So the article had a great deal of meaning for me.

**CF 15.06.15**