

Prison Chaplain

by Christian Labourse, C.M.

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Ah! My sisters, what happiness it is to serve these poor convicts, abandoned into the hands of pitiless men. I have seen these poor persons treated just like animals (SV X, 125).

Fr. Vincent said this in 1655, and today, the service of prisoners is still the service of the poor. I am not certain that they are considered and respected as they should be.

Each Tuesday morning, I go to meet the prisoners in the jail at Cahors. I am given keys to the cells and so I go to see one after the other in a simple friendly visit.

On some days, good conversations develop. On other days, when they are not feeling up to it, they do not want to talk, and so I become very discreet. I have to be attentive to what they want, such as an individual discussion, or simply, like David, a little time to pray with him. I have a small space for these individual meetings.

Every two weeks, on Saturday morning, I suggest a meeting to them. It could be the Eucharist or a sharing of the Gospel, or even a discussion on topics that they want to bring up. At these meetings, Jocelyne also takes part. She is the mother of a family, a social worker, who lives in the pastoral district for which I am responsible. Jocelyne is there for the women's section of the prison, and she, too, listens to them, and shares their sufferings, happy to be able at times to pass on a word of hope.

I have wanted to interest the Catholics of our parish community in this mission to the prisoners. Jeanne, who just recently retired, is ready to receive families who come to visit their members.

Finally, a St. Vincent Team, the modern descendants of the Ladies of Charity, has been started in our area after a parish pilgrimage to the Berceau. This team has decided to accompany the prisoners once they are released from jail. The members try to aid their reinsertion into society by finding them a job and a place to live.

This very small community works on assuring the presence of the Church among the prisoners and on being at their service. Catholic Charities also helps this presence, thereby allowing us to bring to the poorest of the prisoners a considerable financial support that is both permanent and regular. Vincent de Paul asked the same thing of the Ladies at Montmirail: *The association will take care of visiting the poor prisoners and of bringing them some alms and of having them change their shirts each Saturday* (SV XIII, 462). We do not just bring them shirts but all the clothing that they need.

With material support, fraternal presence, and spiritual comfort, we think we are answering the questions that St. Vincent asked: *Who has pity on the poor criminals abandoned by everyone? ... Do we not honor the great love of Our Lord, who helped all poor sinners, without any regard to what they had done? ...* (SV X, 114).

(JOHN RYBOLT, C.M., traslator)