

The Tombs... and a Chaplain in the Middle

New York — (NC) — Father Laurance H. Gibney, Catholic chaplain at the Manhattan House of Detention for 10 years, is willing to take the blame for recent inmate riots at that prison known as the Tombs, "if this will result in penal reform."

"I do not feel responsible for the rioting," but "I will take the blame" to achieve prison improvements, he told NC News after being ordered to leave the Tombs during disturbances there and at four other state penal institutions.

He was told to leave by Correction Commissioner George F. McGrath, who said Father Gibney's "continued presence and activities has served as an incitement to the rebel prisoners and endangers the safety of the hostages."

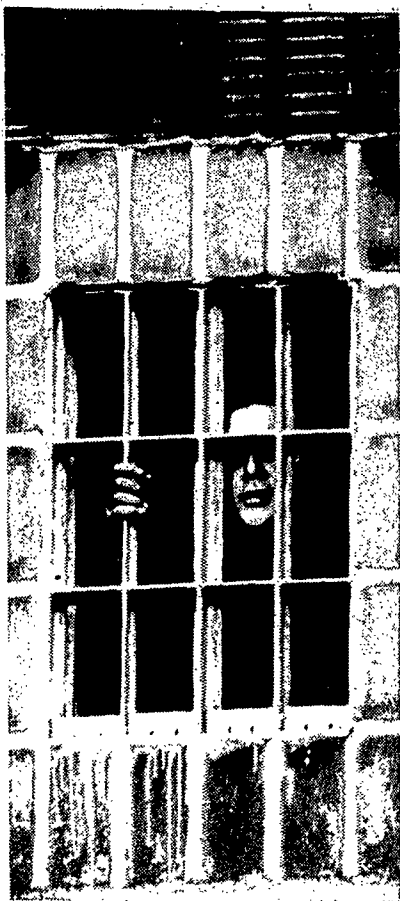
The 41-year-old priest, long-time advocate and spokesman for the Tombs inmates, said he thought his dismissal was "temporary," and that he was receiving numerous telephone calls of support. He added that he wants "desperately to go back" to the Tombs as soon as possible.

"I was there for 50 hours without food, without sleep, consoling frustrated hostages and trying to prevent murder," said the distraught priest, his voice cracking. Father Gibney said he had been asked twice the day before his dismissal to act as a mediator with the detainees — all of whom have been indicted but not convicted.

Although he in no way believes he is the cause of disturbances, Father Gibney stressed that blaming him would "be cheaper" than calling for an "expensive study" into the outbreaks of violence and, he added, "maybe it would mean we could begin to get something done for penal reform."

Father Gibney elaborated on inmate grievances before and during the Tombs riots which erupted there Oct. 2 when 200 of the 1,400 inmates seized the 11th floor, taking 18 hostages. Although Father Gibney was not a hostage he remained in contact with the prisoners.

The day before, nearly all 338 inmates at Long Island City House of Detention rioted, seiz-



FATHER GIBNEY

ing seven hostages. Consequently, riots started at Queens and Brooklyn Houses of Detention and at Rikers Island Reformatory in addition to the Tombs.

By Monday, Oct. 5, hostages taken at all institutions had been released, following a counterattack by policemen and correction guards. Officials began talks with prison representatives on demands concerning better food, lower bail and swifter court consideration.

In an interview with NC News, Father Gibney, president of the New York City Prison Chaplains Association, discussed the problems at the Tombs.

The Tombs, according to the priest, is "the only dungeon I've ever seen above the ground." He said he believes the city has made no realistic attempt to meet the problems of prisoners there and that the only significant change in overcrowded conditions since August has been a transfer of 870 prisoners to upstate prisons, Clinton and Napanoch.

The transfer helped prisoners remaining in the Tombs, said Father Gibney, "but it isn't helping the men who have

been moved hundreds of miles away from their families. These are poor people and the families have no way of seeing the prisoners" who have been moved elsewhere.

Just several days before recent rioting, Father Gibney read a list of 15 "Points of Immediate Consideration" put forward by detainees at the Tombs.

Those which could be met immediately, said the priest, were for replacement of tables and benches ruined in earlier demonstrations, distribution of toilet articles, emphasis on fresh fruits and vegetables in the prison diet to offset lack of sunlight and fresh air, interpreters for Spanish speaking prisoners and access to the prison's law library.

Father Gibney added that there have been four wardens at the Tombs since July. The priest said he doesn't think revolving wardens in itself is an attempt at reprisal, but pointed out there have been no improvements at the prison.

Father Gibney urged New York's Mayor John Lindsay to discontinue outside studies at

the penal system by such people as the Rand Corporation and to confer with the prison

chaplains to get an understanding of what is happening in the prisons.

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