

'I Was in Prison and You Visited Me'

By Michael Groden

Earlier in this series Rochester Interfaith Jail Ministry executive director Robert Bonn expressed a feeling that there was some hesitancy on the part of the Church to become seriously involved in prison ministry.

The hesitancy is understandable. Priests or ministers or rabbis are busy with their own congregations. Working in a prison is a frightening and often frustrating experience, and many times prisoners do not really appreciate the effort.

The Church is, however, making an effort to improve the situation. One example is the Field Education program set up for those studying for the Permanent Diaconate. Three men studying to become deacons are currently working in the Monroe County Jail as RIJM volunteers, and the work has had a deep effect on them.

The Field Education is designed to give students practical ministerial experience in a variety of areas that include work in hospitals, homes for the

elderly and various youth programs. A similar program is also available for men studying at St. Bernard's for the priesthood.

All three men admitted that jail ministry was their first choice. Once in the program, however, their original concepts about life in the jail changed dramatically.

Anthony Mercadel, a Henrietta resident, has worked for RIJM since February. He feels that his work there has helped not only the prisoners but himself as well.

"As a deacon it will be necessary for me to minister to all sorts of people, from many different backgrounds and situations," he said. "Jail ministry has taught me that in order to help anyone you have to know what kind of life he or she has had. You can't reach a person if you don't know what they are thinking about," he said. Mercadel feels that these one to one relationships have helped him understand and empathize with people more readily.

Mercadel, a photo

technician at Kodak, visits two prisoners each week. The visits usually last an hour or more. His wife, Jean, has also become involved with RIJM.

He added that the purpose of his visits is not to convert people, or even to talk about religion unless they choose to do so. "I try to reach the prisoner so that, hopefully, he won't make the same mistakes over and over again."

Mercadel feels that a major reason prisoners get into trouble is a basic lack of self confidence. Prisoners often feel that they can't do anything very well so their self esteem is quite low.

"I talk with them in order to give them hope and courage enough to go through their prison stay," he said.

Leo Kester, a structural engineering supervisor for Kodak, came to RIJM the same way as Mercadel. His spiritual advisor suggested RIJM in order to broaden Kester's ministerial experience.

He credits the RIJM

training sessions and its staff with whatever success he's had in the jail and feels the program is "very worthwhile."

"When I began visiting prisoners the first question was usually 'what are they doing here,'" Kester said. "The prisoners were very reluctant to talk at all in the beginning, but now they look forward to my coming."

One of his prisoners was mentally handicapped. He was, however, judged competent to stand trial. The worst part about dealing with him, Kester explained, was seeing the young man's helplessness.

The prisoner has since been placed in the Monroe County Developmental Center.

Kester, a father of 13, summed up his experiences in the county jail by saying "the ministry has brought me closer to God."

Stephen Carroll, explaining how he came to the RIJM office to volunteer, said that jail ministry "hadn't even crossed my mind" until his spiritual

advisor, Father George Wiant, suggested the jail ministry.

The Ontario resident had worked primarily with youth in the area and thought that ministry would be more suitable. Since working in the RIJM program, however, he is "very happy to have had the experience."

Since beginning his field education Carroll's duties have ranged from sitting down with a prisoner and talking baseball to bringing in art supplies for someone interested in painting.

His visits usually range from 45 minutes to two and a half hours. He said most of the prisoners are not "hard core" criminals and they are very confused and need someone to talk to. "All the prisoners can do in the jail is to sit and worry," Carroll said "It can be a tremendous relief just to be able to leave the cell and talk with someone for a few hours. They look forward to the visits and usually want to know when you'll be coming back," he said.

Carroll added that the County Jail staff is very

cooperative. "The cooperation with guards and other people working there is great."

Carroll, who is a senior manufacturing engineer at Xerox in Webster, also had praise for the RIJM staff. "The first time you go into the jail is a scary experience," he said. With jail ministry training, however, the volunteer has a good idea of what to expect. Carroll said the most useful part of the training was the role playing which occurs during the last session. Experienced jail ministry staffers take the role of a prisoner and the new volunteers practice visiting them.

In describing his first experience in the jail he said that it was frightening to see the doors close behind you. He said that there was a "great feeling of relief when he finally left the jail," and now he can imagine what it is like for the prisoners.

At least once each week, thanks to RIJM volunteers, prisoners can experience at least a small amount of that freedom.

The Open Window

By Father Louis J. Hohman

Imagination, Effort, Can Lick Boredom

Dear Readers,

A couple of Sundays ago I was approached by a parishioner who corrected an element she had perceived in my homily. It had to do with my giving the impression (not knowingly) that Fr. Hohman, young people do not come to church because their parents bad-mouth the church. I had intended that to be only one of the reasons, and was talking about good example and being an advertisement for the church. The woman said to me that the real reason they do not come to church is that they are bored. That got me thinking, so I'd like to take that as a question and give a kind of



FATHER WHALEN

Official Representative

Father John S. Whalen, pastor of St. Patrick's Church in Mount Morris, was the official diocesan representative at the Mass celebrated in Philadelphia by Pope John Paul II for the clergy of the

response to it. I know this has been done before, but guess I felt somewhat strongly about on the occasion, and still do.

The first thing that occurred to me upon hearing the statement was that there is inherent in it an insinuation that one shouldn't be bored; that nothing unpleasant should ever happen to anyone; that if something is monotonous we simply bypass it or skip over it whether it's at work or play or worship. The idea that everything we do

should be exciting and stimulating and entertaining is an idea which is very recent. The tremendous expansion of sensual enjoyment and impression in music and image and in many other ways has made anything less quite unacceptable. I honestly believe that this later on shows in much work that is done in shops, offices and factories: what is boring is bypassed or done sloppily and what is exciting is latched onto. That might be one reason why so many "affairs" arise in work situations. It would seem to me that young people should be told (even if they don't accept the idea) that one is not always going to be entertained and stimulated, and that one will be bored from time to time

for whatever reason.

The next thing I would try to get across is that one does not need to be bored by any good situation in life, and I humbly submit that regardless of the talent of the preacher or the musician, there is something good to be found in the public worship that we call the

Mass. No matter how little that may appear to be, one does not have to be bored by it. We can find something stimulating, but it requires effort and it requires a little bit of imagination. Young people should not be allowed to cop out on their need to work at being instructed or entertained and they should

not be allowed to cop out on using their imagination and effort.

I am not blaming parents who allow their teenage children to use this excuse, because I'm simply not in a position to do so; but I'm saying that it isn't a real excuse.

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