

Problems with the prison system

By Father Paul Cuddy
Courier columnist

Recently my nephew, Father Bill Cuddy, a jail chaplain in Syracuse, was invited by his cousin, Mike Cuddy, to talk to students about crime, punishment and solutions. Mike heads the social studies department at Auburn High School.

After the talk the three of us had lunch at the Auburn Holiday Inn, where Father Bill expatiated on his ideas. Impressed I said: "Father Bill, write an article on these ideas. It would be of interest to our *Courier* readers."

Meditate on these ideas, and let me know what you think.

"Fyodor Dostoevski once wrote: 'The degree of civilization of any society can be judged by entering its prisons.' Entering prisons today one is immediately struck by their overcrowding. New York State prisons are currently 119 percent of capacity.

"When I began jail ministry in 1975 there were 12,000 cells in the New York prison system. We now have 60,000 cells. Today we are putting into prison 300 people per month more than are being

released," he writes.

"Contrary to the prevailing myth, there has been no dramatic increase in crime rate as to require the proliferation of penal institutions. Throughout the 1980s the FBI index of reported violent crimes increased only a few percentage points. The incarceration rates, however, went up 200 percent.

"The explanation for this expansion lies in drugs and society's decision to eradicate this scourge with a law-and-order solution. As a nation that consumes 80 percent of the world's drugs, we have chosen to define certain 'drugs' as a criminal justice problem, rather than as an economic or health and education problem.

"Therefore, we interdict Third World countries as the source of the problem and we imprison low-level drug users and sellers at the head of the problem. The drug kingpins go free. There is little net effect except to put more people into our jails and prisons. The present prison population is 82 percent black and Latino. We never get to the root of the problem.

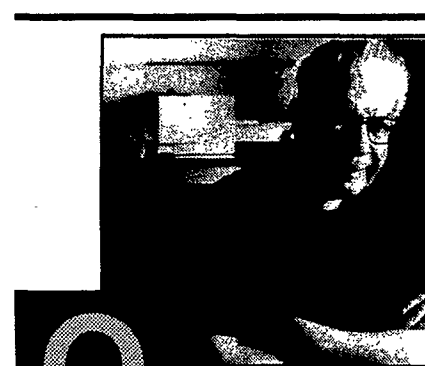
"The economically deprived areas of our cities remain economically

deprived. With little economic activity available to these areas, they become centers for drug trafficking. Ironically the monies used to build more jails and prisons is now money taken away from schools, housing and medical centers that are essential for preventing use in the first place. One Syracuse judge calls this 'the crime that exists before the crime for which people are charged' who come before him.

"We need to look for solutions to our social problems other than incarceration. Putting people into prison, for long periods of time has counterproductive results. People come back to our communities — and most are going to come back — worse for having been in prison.

"While there needs to be 'incarceration for the few,' blue-ribbon committees that study today's prison population state that 65 percent of this population could be in society without a danger to themselves or others.

"Good ideas exist for alternatives to incarceration — viz. halfway houses, drug treatment centers, job training programs, home confinement, expanded probation, community service, fines and restitution



ON THE
RIGHT
SIDE

sentencings. The alternatives that have been tried have proven to be costly, no less successful and certainly more humane than incarceration.

Alternatives to imprisonment is an idea whose time has come," he concludes.

Organizations interested in this subject, might contact: Father William Cuddy, St. Vincent DePaul Church, 342 Vine St., Syracuse, N.Y., 13203.

Prayer, sacraments invite God to us

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Luke 1: 39-45; (R1) Micah 5: 1-4; (R2) Hebrews 10:5-10.

On the Fourth Sunday of Advent — the one just before Christmas — the Gospel tells the story of Mary's visitation to her cousin Elizabeth. Why has the church selected this incident for this Sunday? Could it not be to remind us that Christmas celebrates Christ's visitation to this Earth of ours? But why remember that? Is it not ancient history?

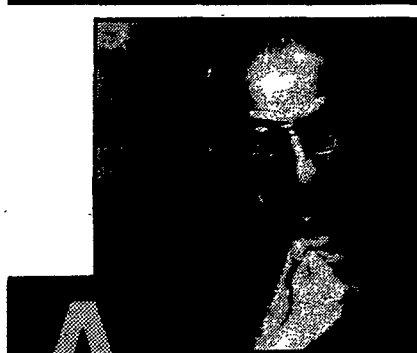
Christ differs from Mohammed, Buddha, and Tao and all the other such founders of the world religions. Those leaders could leave their followers only their teachings and their example. Because He is God, Christ could leave us more than just His teachings and examples. He also left us His life.

He could say, "I will not leave you orphans. I am with you all days even to the end of the world."

And where is Christ today? In His Church, of course. Where in the church you may ask? In her sacraments. Sacraments are simply encounters with the risen Christ. A sacrament is Christ acting among us through His Church. Sacraments are the visitations of Christ to us.

The visitation story teaches us how to receive Christ, who visits us in every sacrament. When Mary visited Elizabeth, she blessed her because she had opened her heart to the word of the Lord. "Blessed is she who trusted that the Lord's words to her would be fulfilled." Mary in turn blessed Elizabeth by bringing Christ to her. He stirred the baby in her womb and filled her with the Holy Spirit.

A few months later, the word of the Lord came to King Herod. From the prophet Micah he learned that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem of Juda. But there was no joyful greeting from him, no gracious meeting; only a decree to slaughter all babies 2 years and under.



A
WORD
FOR
SUNDAY

There you have it: the two reactions to the coming of Christ. Either we will receive him, like Elizabeth did; or reject him, like Herod. There is no middle road. Either we are with Christ or against Him.

We are all familiar with doors — church doors, home doors, car

doors. If they are locked, you can't open them. But if you have the key to the door, a tiny little key, the locked doors can be easily opened.

Our hearts are doors. If they are locked, nobody can get into them — not even God! I say, not even God, for the key to the door of the human heart is our free will and God will never violate that free will. If we lock the door of our heart to Him, He will not force His way in. We can lock God out of our hearts.

What is the key? It is a double key: prayer and the sacraments. Prayer is so necessary, precisely because it says to God, "I want you to come into my heart. I don't, or more correctly I can't, go it alone." Behold he stands and knocks for entrance, and prayer says, "Come in."

The other key is the sacraments. They are invitations and visitations, but they, too, require an unlocking of the heart. We give God the key when we go to confession. We can keep Him locked out or give Him this key as a Christmas present.

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