

How Can We Sing a Song of Sion in a Strange Land?

Ahead of Restorative Justice Week, beginning 12 November, Fr Sean Maher shares his experiences visiting prisoners in France

For almost two years I have been ministering to Irish people in Paris and in France in general. It has been a very great privilege to share the story of this small but extraordinarily vibrant community. We celebrate Mass each Sunday in the Chapelle Saint Patrick in the College des Irlandais, in a tradition that goes back to the Sixteenth Century. The tradition of a faith community from Ireland in this country goes back even further. In this community of 'priests, scholars, soldiers', there has been also another (and often forgotten) group – prisoners.

One of my roles as a chaplain here in Paris has been to visit Irish prisoners in Northern France and sometimes in Belgium and the Netherlands. In prayer and in practical terms, the community of the Chaplaincy expresses solidarity with these prisoners and I often only have to say that I am going to visit a prisoner to find copies of regional newspapers, seasonal Christmas cakes, books and clothes offered by different members of the community to those in prison (when, occasionally and exceptionally, it is permitted to bring something). There is solidarity with those in prison simply because of a common nationality and a shared experience of 'not being at home' which perhaps makes my community more in tune with the plight of prisoners than might be the case if we were at home. In terms of restorative justice, I would like to offer three reflections on the situation of prisoners outside Ireland – a human reflection, a pastoral reflection and a theological reflection.

The Human Situation

Anyone arrested outside of his/her homeland will be immediately more isolated than someone in his/her own country and extraordinarily alone.

Language is a barrier, processes are unfamiliar, legal systems are different. The food and the culture are unfamiliar. Family is far away. There are very few friends upon whom to call. While Embassy staff must be commended for the work they do to offer communication with home and with the local legal systems, and the staff of the detention centres often show extraordinary compassion, there is still the sheer isolation of being locked up abroad. One French priest with whom I discussed this once reflected that every sentence could be counted as double for those who were from abroad.

That sheer isolation is something that summarises the plight of all the prisoners whom I have met. Often their health care is excellent, the compassion from authorities is outstanding, but there is little that can overcome the sense of being a stranger in a foreign land.

The Pastoral Reflection

As a priest, by definition called to pastoral charity, there is a challenge and a privilege in this situation.

On a justice level, we need to respect the system of justice in this country and we cannot be seen to undermine it. On the whole, prisoners receive fair treatment and there is not often an issue of advocate or human rights activist. Occasionally, there can be a need to liaise with legal teams but this falls into the remit of ICPO. However, on another justice level, we can help to restore the balance that has been lost by the person being detained abroad with a suitable pastoral response. There are three pillars to this pastoral response – listening, solidarity and continuity.

During a visit, listening is key. As one of the few people who might be able to chat in English, this is a special and a very privileged moment. There may not be a need to respond. Frustrations may come out, but, on the

whole, the client probably just wants to chat and to have someone who can listen and understand what is being said. One wise monk said to me once 'we listen to everything, right or wrong'. That is the key to that precious hour with a prisoner. It is one of the few times he will be understood and able to let flow in conversation. There is no need to offer any great words of encouragement or any great response. There is a sacred and very special role to just listening to anything in those *parloirs*!

Some people may remember seeing photos of Saint Vincent de Paul visiting galley slaves and wearing their chains for the duration of the visit. I often thought this a pious nonsense – there was not much point in wearing the chains when he knew they were about to come off soon. However, something happens on visits to prisons in France that gives me a different perspective on that act of solidarity. Visitors enter in groups of about twenty. We wait together to go in, we separate to go to visit our own friend or family member in a *parloir*, then we leave at the same time as a bell rings. Next comes something a bit different to what happens in Ireland. Everyone is locked in a room together while the prisoners are searched. This takes up to thirty minutes. Children scream. It gets too hot. There is always someone who wants desperately to go to the bathroom. Everyone knows it will only last for a few minutes, but we are still locked up with strangers, without anything in our pockets, with passports in the care of the guards. It gives me, at least, a strange sense of what it must be like for my friend inside. By the time they open the doors, I am ready for getting out of there. However, like nothing else, it gives me a sense of what being inside the prison must be like. It allows for a real solidarity with our friend inside.

Continuity is the next key. One visit is great, but it is important to keep up

some contact afterward. Letters seem out of fashion now, but this often this is the best way to keep up spirits and offer a continued solidarity with the prisoner. In some ways, these are even more important than the visits. A letter with the results of a GAA match (and a bit of a slag if it is going to a Dub or a Tipp-man) might often be the lifeline of hope to one of our clients.

Theological Reflection

I conclude with reference to another story of people imprisoned in a far-away land. While this imprisonment happened almost three thousand years ago, we still choose their songs as our daily diet of prayer. Their story of hope kept alive in tribulation and of a new understanding of the presence of God in spite of his apparent absence, is the heart-beat of our theology. Our prisoners in a strange land, guilty and sentenced, can offer us a perspective on our prayer of the Psalms and our reading of the Prophets. *Actualization*, the reading of Scripture into our situation today with an openness to what the Word of God may be saying to us in our 'here-and-now' has a perfect seed ground here. Often, there may be little or no explicit or real discussion of faith in the context of a pastoral visit to an Irish prisoner overseas (although there often is something on this level also). However, there is still a very real moment here to grasp the meaning of the psalms and, internally, to sing with an imprisoned people 'How can we sing one of Sion's songs in this strange land?' The Word of God is often closer than we might think!

*Fr Sean Maher
Irish Chaplaincy, Paris*



Irish Council for Prisoners Overseas

Irish prisoners overseas are one of the most marginalised and vulnerable groups of Irish emigrants. They face significant difficulties including an unfamiliar legal system, restrictions on communication, language barriers and discrimination. Some prisoners experience extreme hardship, with limited access to basic necessities such as food, water and medical treatment.

The Irish Council for Prisoners Overseas (ICPO) was established by the Irish Episcopal Conference in 1985 in response to serious concerns regarding the number of Irish men and women in UK prisons. The ICPO currently supports approximately 800 Irish citizens detained outside of Ireland. The majority of our clients are detained in the UK, with significant numbers also detained throughout Europe and in the United States. The ICPO also assists prisoners in South and Central America, Australia and South-East Asia.

The ICPO works to help reduce the burden faced by prisoners and their families. Our focus is primarily on casework and we engage on a daily basis with prisoners, consular officials and many other support organisations. We deal with a wide range of issues, including repatriation, deportation, discrimination, health and legal matters, ill treatment and access to post-release supports and accommodation.

Many Irish prisoners overseas experience extreme isolation and we therefore make a special effort to write

regularly to clients, especially those who have little or no family contact. The ICPO operates a popular Pen Friend Scheme and many prisoners have commented that this scheme has helped to alleviate their loneliness.

An important element of the work of the ICPO is the provision of visits to prisoners overseas. Prison visits are especially important for those who are detained in countries where English is not the most spoken language. We are indebted to the religious orders who are the main source of prison visitors for the ICPO in South and Central America and South-East Asia.

Another integral part of our work is providing information, support and advice to the families of prisoners overseas. The imprisonment of a loved one is a devastating experience and the distress experienced by families is exacerbated when a person is imprisoned overseas. Restrictions on communication, an unfamiliar legal system and language and cultural differences are serious problems that families encounter. We assist families with these issues and provide links to other useful contacts. The ICPO holds a Family Information Day each year to provide families with information and support and to give them the opportunity to meet other people who have a relative in prison overseas.

The primary purpose of the ICPO is to provide pastoral support to those who need it most. We are extremely grateful to all those who support the ICPO in this important work.

Joanna Joyce, ICPO Coordinator

Denied Within – Denied Without

BY PETER GROOME (JAZZER)

There was a time when he did cry,
When letters came exclaiming
'You've been denied'.

There's much good
he feels he has to offer.
But, in this human warehouse
It will never matter.

He sits on his bunk
Continues to comply.
Feeling the years
Passing him by.

Positive adjustments they always say.
When it comes to reclassification day.
No fights, or problems
You're programme compliant
However, your move has been denied.

The 29 years before his crime,
Has never been a part of their chatter,
Or the ten years that followed for that
matter.

The focus now is strictly on
Five minutes of madness,
Sadly leaving a life gone.
For sure he knows he should be
punished
But, should second chances be
completely abolished?

Commutations, pardons and clemencies,
Are all in the hands of the powers that be.
Can they forgive or even try?
All I read and hear is deny, denied.