

The Prison Chaplain and the Mission of the Church

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The author explores the role of the chaplain in a correctional institution, against the background of a sociology of prison, an analysis of the current state of American corrections, and a theology of Church in the penal context.

In an ideal sense, the aim of the prison chaplain is to participate fully in the Evangelical mission of the Church: to proclaim the Gospel to every creature. Specifically, this would entail the pastoral care of the incarcerated as well as assuming the role of advocate for the implementation of justice on their behalf. A corollary of this advocacy would be the continued effort to inform, inspire, and direct the resources of the Church in pursuit of these ministerial goals.

These guidelines suggest several areas of concern that require further development. First, one must have a sense of what ministerial limits and content inform pastoral care in the penal context. Also, advocacy requires a set of objectives reflective of the contemporary correctional experience and commensurate with the social teaching of the Church. Furthermore, the goals must be accompanied at each level with practical guidelines for their implementation and fulfillment. How are pastoral and educational goals to be attained? How does one carry out the work of advocacy?

There is, however, a task even more fundamental than those already presented; one might call it an interpretive one: before chaplains can embrace, and call the Church to embrace, the mission so described, before the shape of their ministerial goals can be defined, they must first determine the effect the correctional institution in which they work has had on the very way they conceive life within the penal context. Given the nature of “total institutions,” where an external author-

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ity regulates every phase of the residents' lives, it is entirely possible, maybe even probable, that the goals that guide ministry in the correctional milieu are more a reflection of the current state of contemporary corrections than they are of the goals enunciated by the Church.

This paper attempts to address some of the ramifications of this interpretive question for those who minister to the incarcerated. It first provides a sociology of the prison and its effect on the identity of those who work there. Complementing this presentation is a brief synopsis of the current state of American corrections. Next, the paper utilizes insights from contemporary sociology and virtue ethics to offer an antidote to the subtle conscription of the allegiance of the chaplain to the designs of the contemporary prison. Finally, an organizational strategy is presented that addresses not only the current state of corrections but also presents a "theology of Church" in the penal context.

Ministry in a Total Institution

Erving Goffman (1961) speaks of the reassembled self of the inmate in a total institution such as the prison. The rituals of the "stripping of the self" and the form of "civic death" of prolonged confinement are familiar to all who have studied or, better, spent an appreciable amount of time within a correctional facility. These rituals of abasement begin with the shaming ritual of the trial and the formal sentencing to imprisonment. They precipitate the radical curtailing or severing of one's primary social relationships, the replacement of one's name with an institutional number, the humiliation of being on display, frequent searches, often public, and the orientation into a rigidly binomial world where the staff of the institution is given virtually total authority over people who have been stigmatized with guilt and inferiority.

This shedding of one's social skin is hastened by three structural practices that reinforce the reorientation of the self (Goffman, 1961, 53–55). The first is the institutional language requirement. One cannot communicate with one's peers, nor with the custodial and treatment staff, until one learns the contours of the language appropriate to the institution: the grammar of confinement and its communicative rules. Second, those within the institution learn to employ what Goffman calls "secondary adjustments," ways to work within the constraints of the system in order to minimize the sense of loss and maximize the few privileges possible while confined. Third, one becomes quickly aware of the internal code of ethics that obtains within the penal environment. These moral sanctions are enforced through formal and informal mechanisms of control. Preeminent among these disciplinary norms is the taboo against betrayal. Loyalty to one's peers is maintained through an internal principle of honor that, in virtually all instances, cannot be violated without devastating consequences.

Goffman (1961, 61–65) contends that in the face of this institutional ethos inmates have four options: they can engage in what he calls "situational withdrawal,"

retreating from all interaction with others save the inescapable requirements demanded by the custodial staff. Another possible approach is intransigence; the detainee rebels openly against attempts to shape behavior in light of institutional goals. One might recall the character played by Paul Newman in the film *Cool Hand Luke*. A third option is what might be termed “colonization” or “institutionalization.” As Goffman expresses it, “the sampling of the outside world provided by the establishment is taken by the inmate as the whole, and a stable, relatively contented existence is built up out of the maximum satisfactions procurable within the institution” (1961, 62). In other words, one masters the secondary adjustments available within the penal context and lives as comfortably as the extreme conditions will allow. The character “Red,” played by Morgan Freeman in *The Shawshank Redemption*, comes to mind. Finally, inmates can undergo a conversion, not the religious type, but a total acceptance of the correctional philosophy of the “keepers” and their view of the “kept”; in other words, the oppressed assume the values and worldview of those who oppress them.

There has been a growing interest among criminologists in the effect of the prison experience on chaplains (Sundt and Cullen, 1998a, Sundt and Cullen, 1998b). Chaplains represent an intriguing area of study for observers of organizational behavior because their motivation, presumably, in accepting the challenge of ministry to the confined is directed by a set of goals not defined by the departments of corrections but by religious belief and commitment. Their task is to minister to the inmates, to win their confidence in order to create the conditions for conversion and a continued commitment to the way of life appropriate for the converted. At the same time, they work under the auspices of the correctional institution and must adhere to its rules and daily regimen, the primary one being the maintenance of security.

Much has been made of the role of conflict inherent in this seemingly contradictory set of requirements (Hepburn and Albonetti, 1980, Kelliher, 1972). What I want to explore is the degree to which the exposure of chaplains to the culture of the jail or prison makes them susceptible to a refashioning of the self in some degree similar to that experienced by the inmate. Also, like the inmate, the chaplain would then find the most appropriate response (withdrawal, intransigence, colonization, or conversion) to daily life and labor within the total institution.

Ministry, of course, can be practiced in a number of ways in the penal environment. However, for the full-time chaplain, the need to create an institutional identity is very strong. This requirement exists if for no other reason than the need to navigate successfully the various strata of bureaucracy. The chaplain must establish and maintain a ministry in the face of institutional needs and the various personalities who oversee operations within the facility.

In the course of these activities, however mundane and innocent they may appear, there is a dynamic interchange between actions and self-understanding. One moves about the compound instinctually, writes memos and discusses

policy with administrators without critical awareness, naturally follows protocol. All of this “normal” interaction changes imperceptibly the way chaplains perceive themselves and what they do (Berger and Luckman, 1966, 72–73).

To the degree that chaplains are present in a full time commitment to a particular facility, and to the degree that repeated action helps forge an awareness of the self in that role, chaplains will learn to express themselves in terms of the institutional discourse unless careful attempts are made to resist. One of the most innocent and yet effective ways of intuiting this language occurs because chaplains must translate their thoughts and feelings, their interpretation of daily occurrences, into a vocabulary recognizable by the institutional staff. To some degree, all translations distort the experience being conveyed, particularly if it is an experience that requires religious metaphors and a particular tradition’s theological ethic to be conveyed authentically (Berger and Luckman, 1966, 26). Some examples would be changing the religious tone of a request to please the personality of the guard, or using “jailhouse” slang to describe an event.

Language both reflects and creates reality, and the day-to-day interchange between chaplains and staff has a way of binding the conversation partners into a well-defined world of meaning. The more conversation takes place, the more the institutional reality and its basic assumptions are reinforced. This also is true of written communications: the endless memoranda, notices, and morale-building signs to which chaplains are exposed on a daily basis.

It was noted that the incarcerated offender seeks to utilize the secondary adjustments available within the institution in order to minimize the constraints of a harsh environment. Chaplains often make similar adjustments. They learn to circumvent the bureaucracy in order to better accomplish their ministerial goals. Many chaplains learn which officers and staff members are cooperative, how to skirt formal regulations in order to maintain the consistency and integrity of programs and religious services. Part of this practical orientation is learned through mastering the institutional language, part is due to the role that the chaplain maintains within the penal environment. That role has clearly defined privileges and responsibilities and places the chaplains, often despite their stated intentions, within the web of interlocking functions that continually reinforce institutional identity (Berger and Luckman, 1966, 77).

While it is possible, as I will discuss, to avoid coming under the ideological spell of the prevailing institutional philosophy, it is by no means easily accom-

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plished. Statements like the following, made by a prison chaplain at Riker's Island in New York City, seem too casual in elevating the chaplain's role above the "bloody" compromises that mark life in virtually all correctional facilities: "I have not been hired here to make the place run, with responsibilities for surveillance, administration, or even control. In this place full of rules, constraints, answers that often come too quickly, I have the good fortune to be a priest" (Raphael, 1990, 23–24). The author does not give proper cognisance to the fact that he is not a generic priest but a priest in *that* institution, and maintains his role there through a web of activities that are highly symbolic and that require some level of compromise with the prison and its activities of surveillance, administration, and control.

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If the communicative network, secondary adjustments, and complementary roles of the penal environment serve to reorient the self, it is largely due to the internal code of ethics that is maintained and reinforced through the institution's language and social structure. Whatever else one might say about the moral tone of the prison, it is founded upon the tension created by detaining people recognized as dangerous, and doing so against their will.

Evidence reveals that chaplains cannot easily escape the moral influence of an institution of confinement. A recent national survey of prison chaplains found that "the vast majority of chaplains (more than 90 percent) reported that helping inmates to adjust to prison and preparing them for a successful return to society were important or very important goals of their work" (Sundt, Dammer, and Cullen, 13). Another study remarked that the value of aiding in prison ad-

justment "may be considered a custodial task" inasmuch as it suggests "that chaplains may help to manage inmates" (Sundt and Cullen, 1998a, 288).

In helping the inmate to adapt to confinement, chaplains to some degree reproduce the fundamental divide between inmates and supervisory personnel. It is this uneasy separation and the undercurrent of coercion pulsing through it that give rise to the moral taboo governing betrayal of the institution by identifying too strongly with the incarcerated. While there are clearly degrees of resistance on the part of chaplains to becoming agents of law enforcement, the barrier between staff and inmate is still a formidable one to cross for chaplains who are linked by communicative bonds and inter-connected role performance with their fellow employees.

A corollary moral position is enunciated by Goffman (1961, 84) in his remark that those who administer the prison automatically cast a wary and judgmental eye on all who are brought there for confinement, that “entrance is *prima facie* evidence that one must be the kind of person the institution was set up to handle.” In such a moral atmosphere, where a large and threatening population must be controlled and the aims of the institution defended, the practical task for the staff is often to “find a crime that will fit the punishment” (Ibid., 85).

Recent guidelines from the Federal Bureau of Prisons reveal the extent to which the mission of the Church is subordinated to institutional priorities, not only of security, but of a particular approach to religion that seeks to avoid giving offense to any religious body. The bureau concludes that the pastor within the institution must balance the role of prophet with the role of “manager of cultural diversity.” The guidelines with regard to worship spaces reveal that they be “neutral in design” so that “any religious group would feel comfortable and not be affronted by the symbols of other faith groups” (Beckford and Gilliat, 1998, 176, 184). Such an outlook, in which the revelation so foundational to a faith tradition is subordinated to goals such as diversity that are seen as morally more appropriate, can lead to a diminished appreciation for the value of the particularity of a religious calling and, perhaps, of the message that is preached. One recent study lends credence to this insight in reporting that “chaplains, whatever their faith, are less likely to see themselves as members of a majority or minority community in prison. . . . They are there as staff chaplains, not as ‘imams’ or ‘rabbis’ or ‘priests’” (Ibid., 199).

The reorientation of the self that occurs in a total institution such as the prison must be taken into account as we seek to analyze the mission of the chaplain. One article on chaplains concluded that their role is complex and calls on them to balance “the biblical call to minister to inmates with the need to function in an island of social control” (Sundt and Cullen, 1998a, 293). It is precisely this inherent compromise with security needs that must be addressed lest the call to engage in the mission of the Church become confused with the distorted and contradictory logic that currently governs the American correctional experience.

Contemporary Correctional Ideology

Not only are chaplains highly susceptible to the internal codes that regulate institutional thought and behavior, they are equally subject to the temptation to interpret their religious message employing those same moral convictions. The philosophy governing criminal justice in America is deeply troubling not only in its effects, particularly on the poor and on members of racial minorities, but in the contradictory assumptions that underlie it. Gone are the days when rehabilitation was the governing logic of the penal system. Although every institution is different and features its own internal sociology, the contemporary emphases on

retribution, incapacitation, and management of risk routinely supersede rehabilitative concerns (Garland, 2001, 8).

These emphases are by no means adjusted harmoniously but exist in a contradictory tension. The values of incapacitation and exaggerated penal exile are largely the result of a populist revolt against the criminological experts. There has been a growing movement on the part of political leaders to listen to the wisdom of the public, the common sense morality of law-abiding citizens, and their angry backlash against criminal predators featuring an unprecedented concern with the victim (Ibid., 9). In this view, the criminal and victim exist in a “zero sum” relationship; one cannot be favored without denigrating the other. It has contributed to skyrocketing prison budgets, harsh penalties, and an expansive increase in the penal population.

On the other hand, there has been a revolution in the courts and in the importation of an actuarial methodology into penal circles that increasingly seeks low cost, community-based forms of segregation and control formulated according to the determinants of risk (Feeley and Simon, 1992). What these two emphases, punitive harm and risk management, share in common is a reliance on social control and, as the statistics reveal, a particular penchant to measure risk and dangerousness in racial and economic terms. As the U.S. Catholic Bishops (2000, 9–10) remarked in their millennial statement on penal reform, current American crime control amounts to little more than a war on the poor.

Given the prevailing correctional philosophy, and allowing for the subtle ways that the moral universe of the prison shapes the consciousness of the chaplain, it is legitimate to suspect that ministerial activities, educational programs, and the political horizon of the chaplain can be adversely affected. One piece of evidence to suggest as much comes from a national survey in which chaplains, who have historically been among the strongest proponents of rehabilitation, showed themselves far more supportive of incapacitation as the primary justification for imprisonment (Sundt and Cullen, 1998b, 22–23).

Resisting the Total Institution

In an enclosed world like the prison, penal employees and chaplains, no less than the inmates, exhibit patterns of behavior, habitual sets of responses, that can be likened to one of the four models of response described by Goffman (1961): situational withdrawal, intransigence, colonization, and conversion. Each response represents the tension between the external social world and the “institutional world” (Ibid., 65). An example of conversion, where chaplains come to perceive and value themselves as they are viewed from the perspective of the prevailing institutional philosophy, is revealed in the words of this minister: “Worship services and religious studies . . . reduce the number of inmates who

must be supervised by housing area staff because inmates are being supervised by the chaplains.” He then added, “When custody staff and chaplains work together as members of an inmate management team . . . correctional facilities will be safer, more secure, and more orderly” (Cook, 1994, 63, 64).

An opposing example from the possible range of responses is found in these words of a former penal administrator: “The prison chaplain, perhaps unwittingly at first, becomes an organ of control and oppression . . . serving the state, frequently in opposition to Christian precepts. . . . Thus the mantle of Christianity masks and protects the prison from criticism—at the expense, more often than not, of the very people the chaplain is ostensibly engaged to serve” (Murton, 1979, 11).

What Goffman has uncovered in his research echoes themes commonly addressed in theological ethics, particularly among those who emphasize an ethic of virtue or character. As one well known Christian ethicist has expressed it: “The language the agent uses to describe his behavior, to himself and to others, is not uniquely his; it is ours” (Hauerwas, 1979, 21). No one speaks a private language and so one’s moral perspective cannot be extracted from one’s primary conversation partners, those whose moral horizon most resembles one’s own. This underscores the difficulty of the work of prison chaplains. Their own ministerial efficiency is usually dependent on the need to work effectively and cooperatively with those who, as it were, hold the keys to the institution. Yet the subtle and consistent exposure to the regimen and communicative network of the institution leads to a “colonization” or “conversion” where the dominant goals of penal harm and risk management can invade and reconfigure their moral horizon.

One can derive similar insights from a sociological perspective. Peter Berger (1969, 45–47) argues that meaning and motivation are intimately related to the ability to create and sustain a moral universe that is consistent and that can conceptualize all that occurs within its own linguistic and moral framework. If chaplains cannot sustain the integrity of the religious message in the face of competing explanations, in this case, reality as presented within the penal system, then the truth of their preaching has been severely compromised. In effect, despite what is said in chapel, God is not the ultimate source of value and authority, the department of corrections is.

Some evidence of this colonization of religious language by an alternative language is revealed in a study of the counseling techniques of prison chaplains in

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New York State. The authors of the study report: “we found that none of the respondent’s descriptions of typical counseling sessions with inmates could be classified as exclusively religious in content . . . we found that 16 chaplains . . . described typical counseling sessions that did not include any mention of religious or spiritual issues and activities” (Sundt, Dammer, and Cullen, 16).

If, therefore, a chaplain is to resist the refashioning of the self, and the rewriting of the “good news” in the words of the total institution, then a conscious and deliberate effort of “intransigence” or “selective withdrawal” must be made. It appears that this protection of, or reconstituting of, a religious explanation of reality offers the only alternative, short of withdrawing from daily ministry, to the colonizing effects of the penal environment. Perhaps the geographical metaphor of an island best conveys what the chaplain must seek to establish. Goffman (1961, 69) writes that every total institution is “a dead sea in which little islands of vivid, encapturing activity appear.” In effect, that island must be the Church, for only within the *ecclesia* can the Christian life be made plausible and conversion to the gospel be effectively maintained.

Several criminologists (Cullen, Sundt, and Wozniac, 2000) have taken note of the importance of this idea for the chaplaincy. They have called for the creation of what they term the “virtuous prison”; it is analogous to the metaphor of the island used by Goffman. It illumines a restorative vision of justice, where inmates face their victims, make restitution, and engage in habitual activities that seek to inculcate virtue. Most importantly for this study, the authors insist that it is contingent on forming a “social consensus about shared values.” Not only do they lend credence to the basic insights of virtue ethics, they provide some direction and alternative to the dilemma faced daily by chaplains who seek religious conversion as their end rather than “inmate management.”

Strategies for Mission

The goal of full participation in pastoral care, education, and advocacy must be seen in light of the vision presented in the last section. It is essential that the chaplain seek to create a symbolically coherent space in which the vision of the gospel can be maintained as an explanation more compelling than that provided in the institutional language of harm, incapacitation, and control of the poor.

In such an “island,” ministry and preaching can have a more penetrating effect because what is being communicated in the religious text is reinforced by the symbols and daily language of those in the community. Having established an *ecclesia*, chaplains and those to whom they minister can engage in the work of translation of all that occurs within the institution into the common language that the adherents share. All explanations then “point back” to the “paramount reality” of God as interpreted within the community’s story (Berger and Luckman, 1966, 21, 26).

Ministry in this context would embrace the staff and correctional officers in a much more compelling way than the formation of instrumental relationships for the purpose of facilitating ministerial goals, or worse, engaging in daily institutional conversation without recognizing its impact on one's own moral perspective. The task of the chaplain would be to seek the conversion of the officers and treatment personnel who interact regularly with the chapel and its functions in order that there might be fuller coherence between the language of faith and the experience within the carceral environment. As the authors of the study on the virtuous prison contend, correctional officers are "integral" to the mission of creating a virtuous community (Cullen, Sundt, and Wozniac, 2000, 25).

The mission of the chaplain also requires that he or she have ready access to the resources of the Church to support the work of ministry, education, and advocacy. As compelling and necessary as the *ecclesia* within the prison may be, it must forge links to the wider body of believers and the collective influence that they can exert to sustain programs of ministry and renewal.

The ability of chaplains to fully participate in the mission of the Church cannot be realized until the idea of service to the prisoner is placed within a different interpretive framework. Such a perspective would need to include an appreciation for the transformative power of the total institution of the prison, the particular way that language carries moral meaning and forms social identity, the specific contours of the contemporary vision of the architects of the penal system, and, most importantly, the need to engage in "selective withdrawal" from the penal ethos in order to foster a virtuous environment where an explanation of reality and the meaning of the universe, based on the Gospel, is consistently spoken and actively constructed.

Chaplains must not only make a conscious decision as to whether they are primarily servants of the administration or the prisoners; they must ask themselves which God they are serving and in which language God is speaking.

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