

# Minister to prisoners

By Ted Hughes

“**W**HATEVER YOU DO, DON'T let them close the chapel. It's the only place where I can go where I'm not absolutely terrified.” A man in his early twenties who is serving a life sentence at a maximum security prison spoke these words to me. As a priest serving full-time with Correctional Service Canada, my ministry involves oversight of chaplaincy services in a number of federal institutions. This inmate's plea affirmed my vocation, not only as a correctional chaplain, but also as a priest. In proclaiming the Gospel to God's people, we recognize and respond to those areas of life where there is fear. We are to be bearers of God's comfort and peace. The catalyst for most crime (and sin) is fear. We may be afraid that, because we are not in charge, our external needs will not be taken care of. More importantly, however, we fear that the deepest needs of our hearts will not be met.

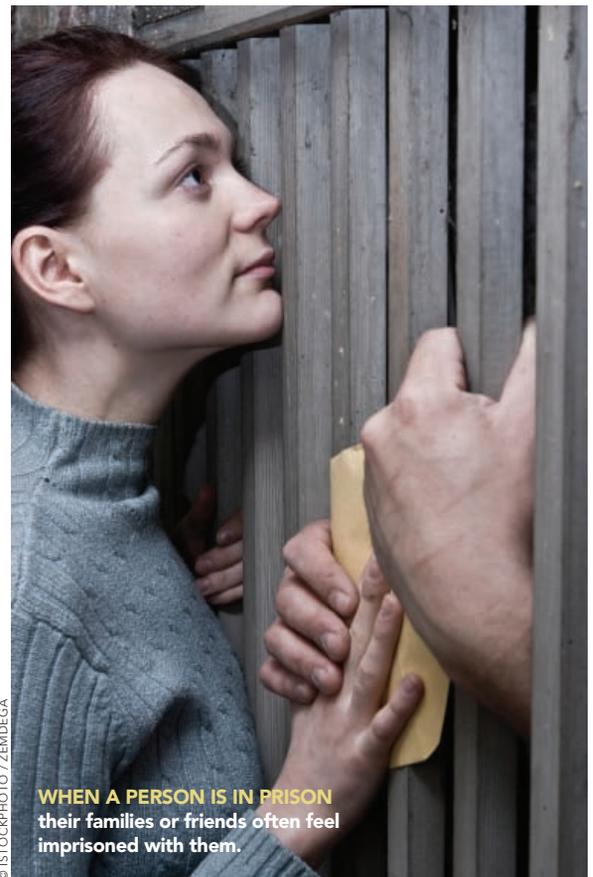
Ministering in prison involves witnessing the effects of violence, denial, deep fear, injustice and manifold desires for vengeance. It means hearing stories of lives shattered and altered forever: those of victims and their families, of perpetrators and their families. In prison the abstract knowledge of evil “out there” becomes suddenly real and up close. If we dare allow ourselves to reflect on our personal attitude towards those who have committed crimes, entering into those mixed feelings offers a tangible opportunity to reflect on the meaning and lived experience of sin, forgiveness, penance and redemption in our own lives.

When we minister to offenders, our faith teaches us to hope for justice that is restorative, that is rooted in the goal of creating a

place where, even in the midst of the human need for punishment which fits the crime, both victim and offender can be healed. Crime may have wounded our own hearts, spirits and bodies, and we may find it difficult or impossible to forgive or to understand why care and compassion are offered to those who commit crime, especially crimes that are most offensive to our society. Yet, whether we are priests, parishioners, victims of crime or prisoners, when our hearts are filled with the presence of God, there is more room for compassion, peace and hope. Fear, anger, revenge and despair have less room to take hold. How can we translate the mandate of the corporal work of mercy “to visit the prisoner” into a reality that each of us can fulfil?

At Calvary, we hear Christ's promise to Dismas, “the good thief,” “Today you will be with me in Paradise” (Lk 23.43). The only person guaranteed a place in heaven is a tried, convicted and executed criminal. Jesus was truly “tough on crime”: he conquered it through forgiveness and compassion, offering restoration and redemption. He brought into the world the divine balance between justice and mercy. This is a challenging reality for us to understand, let alone live out. But it is at the heart of the Gospel message for the salvation of a broken world.

My ministry allows me to celebrate Mass in many different parishes. I often begin by introducing myself and the fact that I minister



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in federal prisons. I then say something like: “Oh, that must be why I recognize so many of you!” Invariably the congregation chuckles. Then I always add: “And for those of you in the congregation who actually have spent time “on the inside”[in a prison], truly you are welcome here.” In the twenty-one years I had ministered as a parish priest I had never thought much about those within my congregation who had been imprisoned, or about their

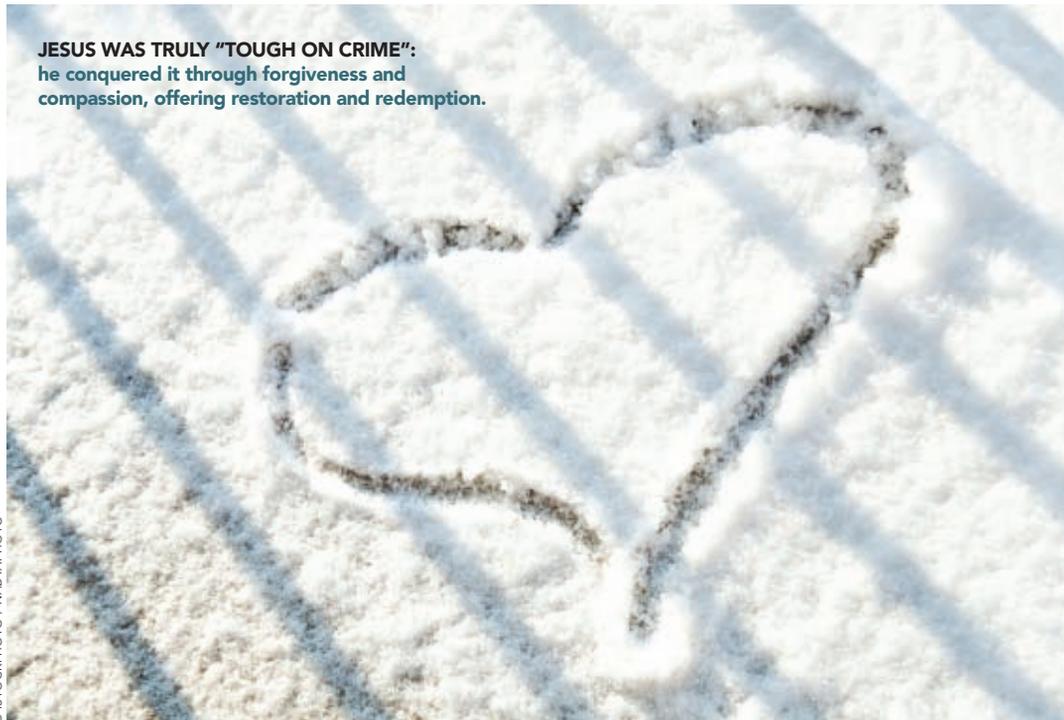
families or those directly or indirectly affected by crime. Occasionally individuals wanting to talk about a relative who had been arrested and/or convicted of a crime would approach me. Sometimes I would minister to victims of crime. But for the most part I was oblivious to a reality that is present in every congregation. We do not need to make a trip to a local penitentiary to visit prisoners. Those who have committed crimes are already in our parishes. Over 90% of those who have spent time in prison will return to the community. Like others who have been institutionalized or labelled because of a certain aspect of their lives (mental illness, addiction, sexual orientation, gossip), those who have been in prison often feel that others somehow know that they had been in prison and will judge them in a negative light and treat them differently.

Prisoners can also be in our parishes vicariously. When a person is in prison their families or friends often feel imprisoned with them. “Who can we talk to who might understand? Who is willing to listen to our ‘secret’ and to our fears? What would others think of us if they knew that the person who made the sensational headlines was our sister, cousin, uncle, best friend?” Every parishioner has the opportunity to practise this corporal work of mercy without leaving the parish, for, in a strange turnabout of the corporal work of mercy, the prisoner may be visiting our faith communities and we don’t see him or her. Are we willing and able to allow the prisoner to visit us? Does our ministry of hospitality as a parish community extend to all? Can we get over our first emotional reaction if we knew that someone who has defrauded, assaulted, abused, stolen or murdered is sitting next to us at Sunday Mass? Can we forgive? Should we? Don’t they really deserve to be punished for what they did? Won’t being “tough on crime” make our streets safer?

In 2009 I was invited to join in a Christmas dinner and celebration attended by over one hundred ex-prisoners and parolees. Entering the church hall where it was held, I was greeted by those who had committed sexual offences, violent crimes, drug offences—the works. They welcomed me. A ministry group known as *Friends of Dismas* (<http://www.friendsofdismas.ca/Default.aspx?pageId=311239>) hosted the evening and provided a true sanctuary for many whose daily lives are filled with fear, rejection and shame. There I felt the hospitality offered to those who rarely would experience

such a level of acceptance and affirmation of their human dignity because they wore the stigma of their crime. In the presence of a merciful, forgiving and redeeming God, they were celebrating freedom from judgment and fear. And I could join them in the recognition that, as one of my former seminary teachers used to say, “We take sin seriously, but we take God’s forgiveness more seriously.”

of the most powerful divine attributes, justice and mercy. Not all of us are able or willing to be directly involved in this area with its confusing mixture of pain and suffering, of just sentencing and mercy, of victims and perpetrators. In our parishes we need to acknowledge with deep gratitude those who work in law enforcement, criminal justice, correctional service and rehabilitation. We need to pray for them and for



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As individuals and as parishes, our challenge is “to hate the sin, but love the sinner,” or, to put it more directly, “to hate the crime, but love the criminal.” Easy to say, hard to practice. It is easy to “hate the sin and love the sinner” if we are dealing with abstractions, or the minor mistakes that we all make. But we absolutely need God’s powerful grace to put this into practice when it involves those who have victimized children, defrauded seniors of millions of dollars, traumatized a trusting faith community, dealt drugs to a family member who overdosed, or caused life-long physical or emotional damage to a teenager. Maybe we can’t find it in our heart to deal with such an awful reality. Maybe Jesus’ words on the cross, “Father, forgive them,” are the best we can do if our own hearts can’t forgive right now.

So, practically, what could we do, as individuals or as parishes, to live out the corporal work of mercy that calls us to visit the prisoner? Canadian society, and perhaps even we ourselves, finds it difficult to reconcile that working with the criminal does not negate the impact of the crime or demean the victim. By working with both we can engender the fullness of two

chaplains and volunteers who carry out the mandate to “visit those who are in prison” and who yearn for the ongoing grace to follow the words of St. Paul to “overcome evil with goodness” when the effects of evil are seen daily. Our general intercessions could include prayers for all who are touched by crime—the imprisoned, their victims and all who minister to them. In conversation we can challenge the default position that criminals must be punished so that justice can be seen to be done. We must beg for God’s mercy to enter those places in our hearts and in our world wounded by the pain of selfishness, crime, violence and abuse that degrades our humanity and instills fear.

Many Scripture passages deal with criminals, the disenfranchised, and individuals and groups that the community has rejected. Today, in our Canadian parishes we have the opportunity to allow these passages to take on real faces in our midst. We might prayerfully reflect over the fact that the early Christian community was terrified to trust and welcome into their midst the apostle Paul. To those communities Paul (the former Saul) evoked terror for his horrific persecution of those who were followers

of Christ, his participation in the murder of Stephen, and his attitude of violence and intimidation that challenged the faith of the first believers in the same way that we are challenged today by those whom we fear might harm us.

The key set of barriers separating the convicted from our parishes are often the invisible but real bars in our own hearts. Fear, repulsion, a sense of human justice, the natural tendency to seek revenge: consciously or unconsciously, all of these create barriers in our hearts that delineate “us” and “them.” The sense, real or perceived, that they are not welcome in our parishes keeps offenders out of our worshipping communities. But the Gospel message, the social teachings of the Church, and those who have ministered directly to the imprisoned will affirm that there is only “us.” All of us together, who recognize our sinfulness, are on the road of repentance. All of us need God’s mercy and that of our brothers and sisters in our communities of faith.

In a 2010 letter to Prime Minister Harper concerning the plan to pass legislation that would cause a significant increase in the prison population, Bishop Gary Gordon, Bishop Ponens of Prison Ministry for the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, writes: “The vi-

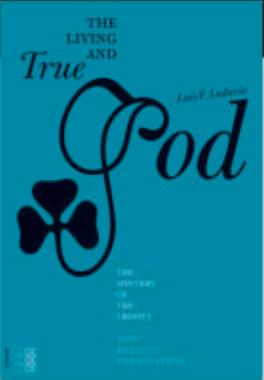
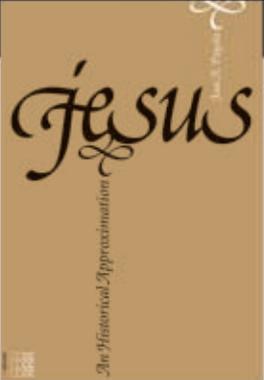
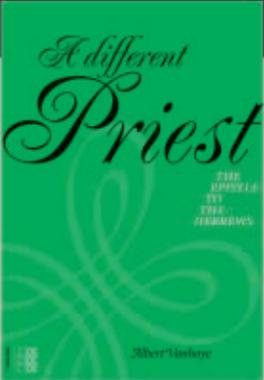
sion of justice we find in Scripture is profound. We are called to be a people in relationship with each other through our conflicts and sins, with the ingenious creativity of God’s Spirit to find our way back into covenant community. How can that be if we automatically exclude and cut ourselves off from all those we label ‘criminal’?” (<http://www.whitehorsediocese.org/>, see “Letter to Prime Minister”).

Have you ever really noticed the number of times, especially in the Sunday readings, that prison, prisoners, captivity and freedom are mentioned? It is not uncommon that ex-offenders, victims of crime, family members and friends of offenders or victims come to speak to me about their reality. Like other groups that remain invisible, many note that their situation is rarely mentioned in homilies or prayer intentions. While pastors and those who formulate the prayers of the faithful probably speak of these people, it may be necessary at times to be quite explicit in bringing home this reality. It is easy to get caught up in the attitudes that characterize the popular “tough on crime” agenda, but are we aware that the foundation of our faith approach is restorative justice? Instead of focusing on the criminal, our viewpoint changes significantly when we ask other ques-

tions such as: What is the harm that is done? Who has been affected? How can harmony and justice be restored? Each year in Canada a week is set aside to reflect on “Restorative Justice.” This year Restorative Justice Week begins November 13; its theme, “Re-Visioning Justice” can be found through various websites such as the Correctional Service of Canada, [www.csc-scc.gc.ca](http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca) or the Church Council on Justice and Corrections, <http://ccjc.ca/>.

In some ways, those convicted of crime, especially the most heinous of crimes, can be compared to those with whom Jesus walked in his day—those set apart, rejected by family and community, and oftentimes filled with shame. They (or their parents) were blamed for their lot in life and were probably seen as reaping what they deserved. But Jesus walked among them, touched them, healed them, and restored them to their families and to the community. Jesus showed reverence and respect for the prostitute, the tax-collector, the poor, the blind, the rejected and the non-believer. We can so easily write off those in prison as “the undeserving poor,” responsible for their lot, deserving punishment and set apart from society. But the Gospel mandates us to be aware of and to walk with those most in need of God’s mercy. ✚

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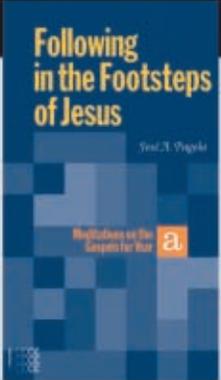
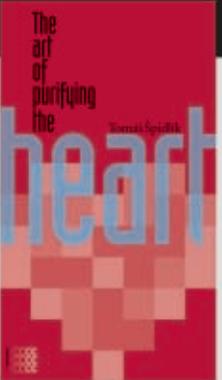
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