

# Encouragement Encouragement

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Prisoners of our own making... New beginnings..?

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Prisons and prisoners are hardly likely to be a topic which, at first glance, makes us want to associate with say 'a Happy New Year' – indeed the thought of prisons are more likely to be a cause for a change of conversation or a prompt moving away to speak to someone else. Yet it is important to remember that January is also a time of re-evaluating and re-assessing our lives, with hopes of better things, changing or breaking habits, or even re-committing ourselves to a deeper journey in faith, and of heart.

New Year resolutions are so-called because, by definition, we acknowledge that something in our lives needs changing or re-assessing. Often these things are linked with lifestyle, such as diet, alcohol consumption, or even keeping in touch with friends. Sometimes they involve more significant moves to be a better person. New Year's Day has been dedicated to the Mother of God, which on reflection, signs to us that she, of all people, can help us move in a better direction and to her Son.

Whatever it is that we experience that we feel has to change indicates that it is something that binds us – keeps us prisoners – as surely as if there were bars keeping us from breaking free. Addiction is not merely to drugs but to any compulsive activity which we seem unable to escape from – the bars are too high or strong. The things can be faults in our makeup, or resulting from bad experiences in our childhood, or those succumbed to in adult life. Here we can list many of these such as gambling, pornography, intolerance, anger, lies, to grave sins such as murder, adultery, violence or abuse. It is easy to dismiss these and point to these things being the property of 'real sinners' or those in prison and so not dealt with in our *own* lives.... And hence we remain captive.

Restrictions imposed by Covid made many people feel that they were in prison, with limitations on our socialising and sharing. In reality, while difficult, This does not come close to those who are in prison

and captive to sin. It is interesting to see that both Jesus (quoting from Isaiah) repeated that 'we are to set captives free'. Jesus also stated, when asked what we should do to follow Him that we should visit the sick and those in prison, reminding us that 'whatever we do to the little ones we do to Him'.

Canon Paul Douthwaite, the National Catholic Chaplain for Prisons, quoted the above enjoiner when commenting on his work. While we may make 'a nod' to visiting the sick, the second part of this 'call' probably makes us shudder. Yet this is partly because we separate ourselves from the possibility of ever finding ourselves in that predicament. 'Not *me*, Lord!' said St. Peter, yet it was the same Peter who

denied Jesus. It was Judas who betrayed Him. Perhaps we should realise that it is by the Grace of God that we are not in prison... maybe by a hair's breadth. Recently I asked Father Paul what were the key elements of his work...

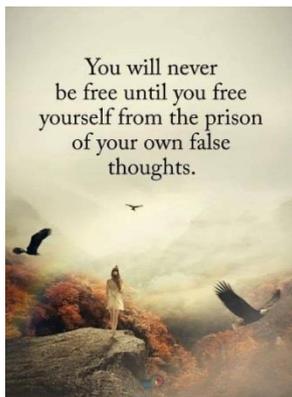
He stated that he often thinks of the saying used by his parents 'God loves the sinner not the sin'. This should also make us realise how easily we can 'overstep the mark' but

also that we are all vulnerable. God's love for us should make us strive for better ways of being Christian. Love is a powerful ally to a change of heart.

Is this not a reason for enabling all people a chance to change, and for us to be willing to change ourselves. Can we not unbind those things that bind us and make us unhappy. So what of those in prison?

Fr. Paul says 'The work of a Prison Chaplain – Priest, Laypeople or Religious – is to provide catechesis and to 'encourage' and help those who are enquiring to re-engage with their faith - so too to provide sacramental support.' He goes on to say that 'all this is very important because studies have shown that when prisoners reconnect with their faith, the likelihood of them re-offending is reduced!' One person once said to him 'The only time in the week when he felt human was an hour he spent at Mass'.

You will never  
be free until you free  
yourself from the prison  
of your own false  
thoughts.



The object of the **new year** is not that we should have a new year. It is that we should have a **new soul**...

G. K Chesterton

Surely a touching revelation!!!

Was it not St. John Paul II who visited and forgave the man in prison who shot him? Pope Francis, of course, visited a prison soon after he became Pope.

I often think that we would be quite shocked at how similar many people who end in prison are like us, but perhaps less able to deal with issues at hand or simply lacking the help that was needed at a critical time. *Listening* is a key element of any ministry, whether in prison or in the wider world. How many people have set themselves or others free by listening or being listened to?

We, generally speaking, 'grade' sin and dismiss those less fortunate than ourselves and therefore minimise the need to change ourselves from within. Another priest once said to me that 'Being a 'Prison Visitor' brought him joy and made him aware of his own failings and how close he might have been to ending up in a jail, save for the good fortune of good parenting or friendship'... But crucially, it changed him and led him to avail himself frequently of confession.

There are also those imprisoned who are innocent, yet there, because of oppression, injustice and politics. It is so easy to lump all people together and maybe theirs is a heavy cross, and we should not forget them in our prayers, and hope for a freer society.

January is thus a time to re-evaluate but also change our perspectives on the future. The Gospel leads us to inner peace and freedom. We should discard everything that requires us to be motivated by fear or constrains us so we cannot have 'the glorious liberty of the Children of God' (Romans 8, 21). Maybe a positive approach would be to help those imprisoned, and there are many ways that this can be done (PACT, Amnesty International), not least of all by prayer or aiding ex-offenders.... Are we not all ex-offenders?

Back to January and New Year resolutions. Maybe we should look carefully at our lives and unbind ourselves from some of the irrelevant things in our lives – a step at a time. Maybe we should endeavour to help those who struggle as victims of violence or abuse, another form of prison and see *all* as our brothers and sisters.

I end with a story that Fr. Paul quotes: 'As a means for the input at the Eucharistic Congress a few years ago I spoke with a person who described his point of view of an Easter Mass in prison, which I was celebrating. I was able to recall the Celebration but was oblivious to the significance of what had happened. Shortly after the Mass began the Governor slipped into the back of the Chapel in the remainder of the Mass. I thought nothing of this until the prisoner highlighted the fact that the Governor had come up for communion last of all and that he had received from the Chalice (which as an aside was administered by a prisoner) who had, in so doing, demonstrated that he was equal around the 'Table of the Lord'. Despite the fact that many of the prisoners had contagious diseases, the prisoner was 'blown away' by this and by his humility... real power for change. (Talk given October 2021)

Food for thought.....?

Halina Holman

### **Pope Francis**

"This year, while we hope for new beginnings and new cures, let us not neglect 'care'. Together with a vaccine for our bodies, we need a vaccine for our hearts. That vaccine is care. This will be a good year if we take care of others, as Our Lady does with us." Rome 2021

### **Prayer**

Shine your light in us, through us, over us. May we make a difference in this world, for your glory and purposes. Set your way before us. May all your plans succeed. We may reflect your peace and hope to a world that so desperately needs your presence and healing.

In Jesus Name,

Amen

*A Happy and Blessed New Year to All*

### **Feast Days in January**

**1<sup>st</sup> Mary, Mother of God**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Second Sunday after Nativity**

**3<sup>rd</sup> The Holy Name of Jesus**

**4<sup>th</sup> St. Elizabeth, 5<sup>th</sup> St. John Neumann**

**6<sup>th</sup> Epiphany (Holy Day of Obligation)**

**9<sup>th</sup> (Sunday) Baptism of the Lord**

**12<sup>th</sup> St. Aelred of Rievaulx**

**16<sup>th</sup> Second Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)**

**22<sup>nd</sup> St. Vincent de Paul, 21<sup>st</sup> St. Agnes**

**23<sup>rd</sup> Third Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**24<sup>th</sup> St. Francis de Sales**

**25<sup>th</sup> The Conversion of St. Paul, Apostle**

**26<sup>th</sup> Ss. Timothy & Titus, 27<sup>th</sup> St. Angela Merici**

**28<sup>th</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas**

**30<sup>th</sup> Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**31<sup>st</sup> St. John Bosco**