

Faith Behind Bars

Some years ago, I accompanied a Catholic prison-ministry team to observe one of their Bible studies at a small county jail. I watched as a dozen or so men in orange jumpsuits and brown slippers walked into the meeting room, got their refreshments, and sat down on metal folding chairs. During the minister's brief talk, and the discussion that followed, the prisoners showed mild-to-moderate interest in the subject of the today's lesson.

Afterward, I asked the team leader for his estimate on the success or failure of his prison apostolate. His answer surprised me. "They come here for the coffee," he replied. "Every inmate 'discovers Jesus' in prison. They come to our Bible studies and feign interest hoping to win favors from us. Once they're set free, they forget all about Jesus."

More recently, I had the opportunity to speak with a husband-and-wife team who visit the incarcerated once or twice a month under the auspices of their local Catholic diocese. They conduct Bible studies, answer questions on matters of Catholic doctrine and practice, and distribute pamphlets, prayer cards, and rosaries to the inmates who attend. Their experience of the prisoners' sincerity is quite different from the Bible ministry's leader.

"We have found the groups to be almost invariably attentive and sincere - listening and asking questions, sharing some personal experiences," the husband said. "We do know that in every group we minister to there may be some who are not really looking for conversion or growth, but we have rarely encountered that in the manner of their attendance at the service."

Most souls behind bars have had scant education and even less religious formation, he noted. "Many have little understanding of doctrines of the faith, even though they profess to be Catholic," he explained. "But occasionally an inmate has appeared to know the Bible as well as the distinctions that are properly Catholic. It makes you wonder what went wrong."

Prison apologetics efforts, when conducted from the outside, are hampered by limited access to the prisoners: So many prisoners, yet so little time. "The challenge is that we see them in a group, once a month, and usually not the same ones each month," he said. "So follow-up is difficult at best, [and] the prison has rules that do not make follow-up an expected activity."

Even within those corrections facilities that are relatively generous in accommodating religious ministries, it may not be sufficient to supply the kind of consistent formation and spiritual direction required to solidify inmates' understanding of the Catholic faith. Perhaps it can't be done well from the outside. Maybe it works better as an inside job - peer to peer, inmate to inmate.

There is evidence that it does just that. Two Catholic men, John Ballentine and Russell Ford, have been conducting prison apologetics "from the inside" of their respective penitentiaries for a number of years now - and with remarkable results. These are the stories they have shared with me of how they lead others to Christ and to his Church through their apostolates behind bars.

Thunder in the Cells: Raised a Bible-Belt Christian, John Ballentine fell away from the practice of the faith at 18 and entered a period of worshipping at the altar of sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll. He was convicted of a felony in 1989 and has been incarcerated in Virginia now for over two decades. Although the self-described "model prisoner" has been eligible for parole hearings since 1997, to date he has been offered no reprieve from his 300-plus-year sentence.

After he hit rock bottom and found himself behind bars, he began a serious search for God and the true Church. He found it, quite dramatically, when he happened upon the celebration of a prison Mass. His faith renewed, he began to devour Catholic spiritual reading. Some months later he was able to convert Brad, his cellmate of 10 years. Soon they were the biblical "Sons of Thunder," actively engaging Protestant inmates in apologetics debates.

Convert is not the right word for their efforts, however, as Ballentine is quick to point out. "I've learned that I don't convert. That's God's job," he said. "I just try to plant a seed which may be watered later." Some of those seeds have sprouted and borne fruit. Ballentine said he has been a godfather to four prison converts and presently is preparing two recently baptized Christians to enter the Catholic Church. They are young (both in their early 20s), poorly educated, and facing a lot of prison time—so this prison apologist has his work cut out for him. "I fear that I have failed them," Ballentine mused. "I wish that I had some magical words to be able to cut through the ignorance of modern 'education.' I feel so sorry for the countless kids today who have no clue as to so many things, and not just religion."

Apologetics Offensive: Ballentine's apologetics outreach is up close and personal. He has taught doctrine classes to up to 20 fellow prisoners, explaining and discussing teachings such as the sacraments, the Virgin Mary, and the papacy. He

meets regularly with a Methodist inmate for a good-natured "lunch discussion" about Catholicism. He has gained respect by standing up to bigger and tougher convicts who try to disrupt his class, and he has shelled out no-nonsense rejoinders to those who respond with cynicism or apathy to his entreaties on behalf of the faith.

He also publishes and distributes a typewritten apologetics newsletter - which he (appropriately enough) calls "Bullets." "Bullets are ammunition used to defend oneself," he explained in a recent edition. "When you have a debate regarding religion, you defend your faith and point out the errors of others. It is called apologetics . . . I think that the best defense is a good offense."

That idea is at the heart of Ballentine's mode of operation, something he calls "offensive apologetics." Apologetics doesn't mean apologizing, he points out. Rather than let the antagonist put him on the ^defensive with an attack against the faith, he will issue a challenge to the faith of the non-Catholic.

Fundamentalists will often take a Bible verse or two out of context to attack the Catholic Church. Ballentine has found that they usually don't know where to take their argument beyond that. So he pulls out his secret weapon. "We Catholics also have Tradition, so we've got a double-barreled shotgun to respond to a pea-shooter protest person!" he said. But he adds a word of caution: "We must also be careful, for with great ammo comes great responsibility."

That means not using more apologetics "firepower" than necessary, and that requires an accurate reading of the human heart. "Each engagement is individual and must be so suited," Ballentine said. "Most people have hidden attacks in their questions and do not question to learn, but to ridicule or show off. I've found that a basic grasp of dogma will not only be a great defense, but an offense, too. But one must discern if the questioner has noble intentions - and then catechize as well."

From Agnostic to Apologist: Russell Ford, who has been incarcerated in south-central Alabama since 1987, is perhaps the best-known Catholic convict in the United States, thanks to the many articles by and about him that have been published in *This Rock*, the *National Catholic Register*, and other Catholic journals. He has also written a critically acclaimed book, *The Missionary's Catechism*, a popular question-and-answer guide to the teachings of the Church and how to defend them before others.

His apologetics apostolate has reaped a great harvest: By his own count, he personally has helped more than 100 people convert to Catholicism, including some who have corresponded with him from other prisons and some on the outside who have never been in prison. He has also been a godfather 77 times.

Ford had been a self-proclaimed agnostic for more than a dozen years by the time he landed in a jail cell. A year later, a fellow prisoner who had returned to the Catholic faith while serving his sentence brought Ford to tears of conversion as he explained the doctrine of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

Before he was even received into the Church, the priest who was chaplain at the prison handed Ford a catechism and told him to teach it to other inmates. He resisted, but a follow-up letter from Archbishop Oscar Lipscomb of Mobile urged him to comply with the chaplain's directive. Despite his own hesitation, he studied the faith voraciously and became a Catholic catechist and apologist.

There were obstacles to overcome, of course. Criminals can be a tough audience, unwilling to open minds and hearts to Catholic doctrine. Ford had to learn good apologetics methods so that he could persuade by faith and reason, rather than by strong-arm tactics. Prison officials have discriminated against Ford, confiscating Bibles and catechetical materials and ordering him not to teach the faith. During a parole hearing in 1995 at which he was described as a model prisoner, he was refused parole after his priest and confessor refused to divulge to the board what he had said in the sacrament of penance. Ford then sued the State of Alabama and has not made parole ever since. He will complete his 25-year sentence in 2012.

In one prison, after Ford managed to win a few converts from a formidable satanic sect, the remaining devil-worshippers put out a contract on him. Then there are the Fundamentalists, who arrive en masse twice a year to infiltrate and evangelize the prison population for an entire week - complete with testimonies and evening crusade services - and win souls for Christ.

The "Fundies," as he calls them, are full of enthusiasm but leave much to be desired, he said. That is the most common type of Christian convert in prison: one who wants to fly straight but does not get the substance he needs to accomplish it. "Modern Fundamentalist Christianity provides little to hold onto spiritually or morally. Everything is based on high emotions," Ford said. "When the good feelings are gone, so is the right living." As a result, while the recidivism rate for Fundamentalist converts hovers around 70 to 80 percent, the rate for committed Catholic converts runs in the single digits.

The Proof Is in the Proofs: Substance is a need that Catholic apologetics fills. Through his First Century Christian Ministries, Ford and his converts publish a newsletter and provide catechetical materials to thousands of prisoners in dozens of other penitentiaries through their Catholic chaplains. "Fundamentalists are incapable of proving two things: The existence of God, and the inspiration of the Bible," he said. "We can prove both, and convicts find this fascinating. They also are impressed with proofs from Scripture for confession, purgatory, and the Most Holy Eucharist."

Ford said he has not run across any real "stumbling blocks" among prisoners when teaching the Catholic faith. It's all a matter of presentation. A good lay evangelist must be not only a good catechist, but also a good apologist - and that requires knowing Church history, sacramental theology, moral theology, and Catholic doctrine.

It is important in apologetics to avoid getting into an emotion-fueled dialogue. Whoever "wins" an apologetics debate is a loser, he said. "Accept from the beginning that your arguments will not change your opponent's mind," Ford advised. "However, since there is no such thing in prison as privacy, at least 10 others will be listening in. Some will eventually come to you with curiosity based on the logic and clarity of your arguments."

He echoed Ballentine's earlier statement about who it is that does the converting. "The most important thing for the lay evangelist to remember is that it is not his job to make converts," Ford said. "His only job is to present the faith the best he can. Conversions are the responsibility of the Holy Spirit. "Not once in 21 years of apostolate have I ever asked someone to become a Catholic," he added. "That's none of my business, until the inquirer lets me know he wants to be a catechumen."

Will It Stick? So what about that prison minister's comment about every convict finding Jesus in prison? "Not every convict finds Jesus in prison," said John Ballentine. "But many - too many - are finding Mohammed." Russell Ford agreed. While some prisoners use religion to manipulate the system, "the truly scary thing about conversions in prison today is not the lack of sincerity among Christians, but rather the militant sincerity of the various Islamic sects," he said. "Prisons today are little more than training grounds for domestic Islamic terrorism."

Ballentine said he has seen inmates cloak themselves in Christianity in hopes of getting help from a church once they are released. Yet he has also seen men sincerely turn their lives around with the help of a faith they discover or rediscover

behind bars.

Although he has not been a free man for awhile and can't say whether a prisoner's faith "sticks to the ribs" and remains strong in the outside world, he suspects that many at best become Sunday Christians but do not internalize the faith enough to let it change their entire lives. Only time will tell, he added, just as Jesus indicated in the Gospels. "We must rely upon God to judge and allow the weeds to grow with the wheat," Ballentine said.

Think You Feel Called to Work with Inmates?: Prison apostolate is a vocation, perhaps the most demanding work in the Church, according to Russell Ford. It is a grimy, emotionally gut-wrenching initiative that is difficult both spiritually and physically, and not something to be undertaken lightly. "My experience has been that most laymen get involved in prison apostolate for two reasons: One is a fascination with prisons and prisoners, and the other is that they want to feel good about having been involved in something important to Christ and his Church," Ford explains. "These are not good reasons . . . Indeed, they are motivations that will cause more harm than good. We must always remember that souls hang in the balance."

Here is Ford's advice for those who are serious about entering a prison apostolate:

- Start by making a few visits to a local prison with an established Catholic apostolate. Observe all that goes on. Ask questions. Get to know some of the inmates. Otherwise, make no comments.
- After these initial visits, make several visits of another kind: To the tabernacle at your Catholic parish. Stay and pray before the presence of Christ for an hour each time. Talk to him about your interest in ministering to the incarcerated.
- If you still have an interest, sit down and talk with the director of the Catholic prison apostolate. Ask questions and get feedback—the more information, the better. This is a discernment process.
- Visit Jesus in the reserved Eucharist once again. Ask him to reveal to you whether you are called to this apostolate.
- If you still feel called, find a good priest who can direct you through the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. Have him hear your general confession and ask him to teach you about holy detachment and how to practice it.
- With this preparation, you are ready to begin.