



Jesuit Scholastics John Mulreany, New York Province, Richard Ross, Detroit Province, and Fr. George Williams, SJ, New England Province at MCI-Concord.

Ignatius Behind Bars

by James Parker

There is nothing quite like an American prison in the rain. The damp turrets and outer ramparts of MCI-Concord, as I make my approach from the parking lot through late spring drizzle, are wholly resistant to metaphor, and in the front hall, a queue of visitors exhales resignation and wet denim. At a checkpoint, bag emptying and patting-down proceed at their usual pace.

The Massachusetts Correctional Institution at Concord is a medium security prison with a population of over 1,400: the first stop for every freshly convicted male in the state. I am here, in the company of a press officer from the Department of Corrections, to observe a process recently initiated by prison chaplain Fr. George Williams, SJ—to watch his introduction of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius to a group of prisoners.

Fr. George is a youthful 50 years old, bearded and quietly authoritative. He has been working with prisoners for over a decade, but the use of the *Spiritual Exercises* is a new development in his ministry. “St. Ignatius realized that not everybody has the ability or the leisure to make a concentrated retreat,” he says.

“How do you give the person who lives under difficult circumstances, with limited education and resources, this experience? So that’s what I’ve been doing. This is such a wonderful resource, and it really is a natural for the prisons. What shocks me is that to my knowledge no one else has done it.”

The plight of the unreformed prisoner, held as tightly by his own mind-forg’d manacles as by society’s chains, would indeed seem to present him as a natural exercitant.

“Most people who go to prison in this country are poor,” comments Fr. George, “but the real poverty that I see in them is the lack of imagination, the lack of a vision of a meaningful life—because that’s what was stolen from most of them in childhood. So to use the imagination, in the form of the *Spiritual Exercises*, is very liberating to them.” Inside the prison chapel, six gray-clad inmates arrange themselves along a loose semicircle of chairs. Directing the group is Richard Ross, a student at Boston College’s School of Theology and Ministry. Fr. George sits slightly apart, with his back to the wall, a supervisory presence.

As the men begin to sift the week they’ve just had, the genius of the Ignatian method—its binocular attention to both the surface fuss of life and the gulf beneath—is swiftly apparent. One inmate gives solemn thanks for the removal to another facility of the loudest person on his tier. Another reports that on his tier a broom went missing, causing an uproar: “A lot of drama was being brought to this, but somehow I was able to let it go.” A third man tells a story. “I had a thing on Thursday,” he begins. “A huge violation. My cellmate left his wet towel on my bunk—I come back from the yard and there it is. So I throw it up on his bunk and I just start plotting: ‘I’m gonna take him out,

I'm gonna smash him in the mouth, it doesn't matter, I'm going to Max (Maximum Security) anyway... But God gave me some time, like an hour and a half, to chill out. I could tell he'd left in a hurry because there were

in his imagination he entered the scene as Satan. "I put myself in there as the Devil. Like 'Show me! If there's a God, go ahead, heal somebody! Do something!' I was playing the Devil!" He sighs. "But I know that if I do that

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bottles of lotion and soap all over the cell. So he comes back and instead of hitting him I say, 'I'm pissed at you.'" "You noticed that he was in a hurry," echoes Ross gently. "God moved you out of yourself for that moment, to be able to think of him. That's the movement of the Spiritual Exercises."

Equally potent, in this context, are the meditations upon the Gospel, the action of which appears to dispense the men from some of the basic physics of prison life. "The term that's used in this class is 'imagine,'" says one. "The block is the block, but I've been given some permission by coming here to be freer with my imagination, this freedom to be more vivid in my prayers." A young

inmate called Shane—shaven-headed, gym-bulky, a bottle of Canada Dry at his feet—begins to talk about the previous week's reading. It was Matthew 4, the temptation of Christ, and Shane announces with some pride that

for too long I sin way more than I can repent for."

The week's reading is John 13: the Last Supper. "Why would Jesus wash their feet?" asks one inmate, red-faced and slightly hectic. "Seriously. What's that about?" "It is crazy," agrees Ross. "Absolutely crazy, the idea that God would become the lowest..." Fr. George, by way of illustration, invokes the holy name of the prison superintendent: "It's kind of like if Peter Pepe came round with a toilet brush and said, 'Can I clean your cell?'" The cons look thoughtful.

The prisoners get no credit for their work with the *Spiritual Exercises*. "They do it for themselves," says Fr. George. "Most of these guys I've known since they were 17 years old—the ones who grew up in the Boston area and are now doing state time. How do you measure grace or someone's degree of opening-up to the presence of God in his life? I have no way to measure it, any more than in my own life. What I see is that little by little there's a very slow, incremental change in them." "I'm grateful for it," confides one prisoner during the session. "Back on the block, plottin' on stuff, it's all negative. But this gives us something positive. I see Shane and

I can say, 'Shane, what's up?' and we can talk of something that's worth speakin' of. It could be a lot worse. It has been a lot worse."

This is an adaptation of an article by James Parker, which appeared in *The Tablet*, a weekly Catholic newspaper published in the United Kingdom.



James Parker was born in London in 1968. In 1998, he moved to the United States and now lives in Brookline, Massachusetts, with his wife and son. He is the

author of *Turned On: A Biography of Henry Rollins* (Cooper Square) and a correspondent for *The Atlantic Monthly*.



Deborah Grondin, a student at Boston College School of Theology and Ministry, is part of the team.

In the spring 2007 issue of *JESUITS Magazine*, we introduced you to Fr. Williams. He is one of several New England Jesuits working in prison ministry. On November 19, 2008, Fr. William Barry, SJ, was interviewed by Mary Richardson on *WCVB's Chronicle*, about his work with an inmate who, while in prison, is trying to help youngsters stay out of trouble.



For more information about Jesuit prison ministries visit: www.sjnen.org and click on *Jesuit Ministries*.