

I WAS IN
PRISON
AND YOU

WISI



TEED

ME.

STORY
BY ANNE SUTHERLAND

INTERVIEWS
BY DANIEL HOPPER

SETTING YOUNG CAPTIVES FREE

*Sr Frances Flemming RSJ and
Lee Bromley*

On 11 November this year, the Catholic Church observed Prison Sunday—an initiative by Pope Francis that began in 2016 during the Year of Mercy to raise awareness about prisoners and their families.

We recently sat down with three chaplains working in a prison and juvenile justice centre in the Diocese of Wollongong to learn how their radical ministry contributes to the life-giving freedom of Jesus Christ that can be found in every prison cell.

Sr Frances Flemming RSJ is a Josephite nun of 53 years and Lee Bromley is a mum and pastor at Eternity Christian Church. Funded by the Department of Juvenile Justice, CatholicCare Wollongong is the auspicing agency for chaplaincy services run by Sr Fran and Lee at Reiby Juvenile Justice Centre in the Macarthur region of the diocese, where traumatised lives—boys and girls as young as 10–15 years—are detained. Lee and Sr Fran both know *there is a darkness deeper where only love can go*. So, carrying God's torch and his big set of keys, they go down to these hidden places of the heart and unlock doors that set the young captives free.

Lee says she was intimidated when she first started working here. "All the boys are quite scary, but it's a facade. They suffer a lot of fear and anxiety themselves," she says.

Family breakdown, family violence, witnessing horrible things, maybe being sexually abused. Mental health issues like ADHD, fathers in prison, and mothers on drugs. Some have even had the intergenerational pain of parents who were in Reiby.

Sadly, Indigenous youth—boys and girls—make up the majority of detainees.

Into this chaos, Reiby brings security and structure. It is a place of rehabilitation, not incarceration. The staff work hard to make it feel like family. "I'm the mum and Sr Fran is the grandma," says Lee.

The chapel area, hard fought for, is now a hub of peace and healing. It overlooks a pond with fish and turtles. The kids look forward to their art and craft sessions, bible studies, relaxation and meditation programs. Trish Quig from CatholicCare also runs a program called *Seasons for Growth* to help with the healing of grief—particularly pertinent as 63% of the kids inside Reiby committed their offences after a significant person in their life had died.

"When young people are in here [the chapel], problems come up and get solved", says Sr Fran. "It's around the table that they're really coming to terms with where they need to be moving. There's always food and drink—it's very Eucharistic. They might say something that alerts you to the fact that they've got it; that they've come to some understanding of what they might need to do. Change is possible for these kids ... yeah, change is possible," says Sr Fran, her voice warm and passionate as she talks.

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Lee Bromley and Sr Frances Flemming RSJ

PHOTO: DANIEL HOPPER

She continues, “It’s about loving them back to life. It’s about loving them into life. It’s somewhere in the middle. One of my favourite things is to remind them that God is faithful and he will never, ever give up on them. He says, ‘Just let me love you.’ My favourite psalm is: ‘I thank you for your faithfulness and love which excel all I ever knew of you. On the day I called, you answered me, you increased the strength of my soul’” (Psalm 138:1–3).

Sr Fran gets her greatest joy from being that living psalm for others. “I always make sure if I see someone, I stop and have a yarn—staff as well. It’s not so much about setting up a meeting, it’s just free.” She loves the one-on-one when the kids want to come down and talk with her. “I’m not interested in what they’ve done. I’m interested in them. I tell them that God wants to hang out with us, warts and all.” And, so does Sr Fran.

Lee says it is vital for these young people to have a concrete experience of this love. She says, “To give them a sense of hope for the future, they need to see that there are good people out there in the world so they can seek it out for themselves in the future.” That’s why, with the help of Br Paul Hough, they enlisted the help of senior boys from St Gregory’s College in

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Campbelltown to be role models—big brothers—who visit on Wednesday’s during the school term to play football and volleyball with the young people in Reiby. When it was first mentioned to the Year 11 boys, the whole grade put their hands up. On one of the afternoons, the Reiby crew hosted a high tea that they had cooked for the St Greg’s boys. That was a high point for both sides.

Sr Fran and Lee both agree it gives these disadvantaged kids a snapshot of what normal life can be like, and says to them, “Look, you might be in here, but you can do this.” Conversely, the boys from St Greg’s see what a privileged background they come from, and it helps them to relate to others who are different.

Towards the end of their sentence, the young people in Reiby undertake a program to assist them in determining what they’re going to do when they get out. In earlier years, when their day of release arrived, all their possessions were

just thrown in a black garbage bag as if to say their life was garbage. “Now,” says Lee, “we send them off with a beautiful tote bag—in it is a card, and some toiletries and phone numbers. It helps them to know they don’t go out alone—someone’s still interested in them.” Lee and Sr Fran continue the care for months, often years, with visits, phone calls and advocacy. This may be the young person’s only life-line.

Because of this chronic lack of support services, up to 68% re-offend. “They often come back in here for Christmas because they have no Christmas at home. Why wouldn’t you reoffend to get back in here? It’s safer,” sighs Sr Fran.

Lee puts a lot of focus on helping these youth get practical skills to cope on the outside. Most of the 15-year-olds who come in have a reading age of five. So, with a mum’s heart, she started a homework centre 15 years ago so they would at least have basic life skills like reading a newspaper, browsing the internet or looking up a bus timetable. It runs once a fortnight on Monday nights and is staffed by over 30 volunteers who want to make a difference. Again, it’s the role model of good people showing these “modern orphans” that hope and love really do exist in the world—that things can be different for them in the future.

LOITERING WITH INTENT

Deacon Peter Presdee

It's the distinctive Australian—rough on the edges—accent that catches your attention. Some would think that an ordained deacon may speak in a more cultured tone, but Dn Peter Presdee sits comfortably with who he is—his faults, his faith and the frailties of the criminals he visits with, as a prison chaplain at South Coast Correctional Centre in Nowra—a maximum security prison housing 500 men from “anywhere and everywhere within the state of New South Wales”. As you listen, you see a man bending down and drawing in the dirt; challenging, but not forcing, a message he lives by. “The best way to accept God’s love is to accept that *I’m* not perfect,” he says.

Dn Peter freely admits to having thrown a lot of stones in his life: “I know the language of the street,” he says with raw honesty, speaking of his background in trade unionism, street ministry in Campbelltown and running a St Vincent de Paul Society refuge before becoming a deacon. “So, if someone’s way of talking is ‘strine like’ and they apologise,

I say, ‘Don’t apologise. Just talk the way you need to talk. I’m not here to be here on a pedestal for you.’ They get a surprise to know a cleric is human, but it’s in our humanity that Jesus works, not in our position.”

The *who I am* of Dn Peter took many years to arrive at. In his youth, he felt called to be a priest, but after four years in the seminary, he left and led a “wholly secular life”, dabbling in other churches until he returned to the Catholic faith by way of a coincidental miracle. After his conversion, he studied and prayed, prayed and studied, for 10 years—feeling called to serve the Church as a deacon with “no clear plan”. What he was being asked to do wasn’t easy, and eventually, this long faith journey led him to move his family to Nowra to work as a prison chaplain.

A typical day always starts with prayer. “I say my Office. I’m very, very strong on that and I always say the minor prayers during the day, coz without prayer, I can do nothing. I am an instrument in there, the same as anyone else is. We’re all part of God’s voice there,” says Dn Peter. He uses the plural to encompass his colleagues of other faiths who work with him on a pastoral team.

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“After that, I make myself available for any prisoner who has specifically requested to see a chaplain. We run chapel services—either a communion service, or a bible study, or prayer and singing. If I run a communion service, it’s Catholic. A strong view I have is to introduce the inmates to Jesus and his family. I talk about the saints and often Mary. They gotta know their mother.

“We don’t ask anyone who they are. We just give them the fruits of our faith,” he says.

Dn Peter continues, “The main body of my day is ‘loitering with intent’. I might go down to an exercise yard or a pod and see how they’re flying there. You gotta be available. Some respect you, some don’t. But, if you look at the Gospels, Jesus always gave people space.

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“People are angry at God, angry at themselves, angry at everyone. I always tell people, ‘If you’re angry with God, tell God you’re angry with him. God’s big enough to listen to your anger.’ But I also tell them that God’s prepared to walk with them.”

And what does Dn Peter do when they’re angry with him? “I listen to them,” he replies calmly. It’s that understated passion in his voice that lets you know that there is nothing he wouldn’t do to get through the message of spreading God’s unconditional love to the very edges of humanity.

“Jesus has a special heart for the poor, and we are to be Christ to them. We need to start becoming identified more and more with the poor. That’s where the Church’s mission is.

“Through my Baptism, I’ve been told to take Jesus to the people,” he says.

One of the biggest problems that Dn Peter identifies in the mission field is that it is so understaffed when it comes to supporting prisoners on the outside. “So many of them come back in. They walk out of a place where they’ve got some sort of protection, and back into violence—families where domestic violence is rife, crystal meth and alcohol abuse. All that stuff is just a process of hiding from your own self.

So many of them come back in. They walk out of a place where they’ve got some sort of protection, and back into violence—families where domestic violence is rife, crystal meth and alcohol abuse. All that stuff is just a process of hiding from your own self. That’s its own prison.

That’s its own prison. Of course they’re gonna want to do something wrong to come back in. It’s safer in here.

“Kairos and St Vincent de Paul do a phenomenal job, but maybe it’s time to look into community chaplaincy—where we go into areas that we wouldn’t have gone into in times past,” he says.

Dn Peter believes the model of *restorative justice* holds the template of long-term healing for both victim and offender. He tells the story of St Maria Goretti as an example. Born in Corinaldo, Italy in 1890, St Maria Goretti was the eldest of six children. Coming from a poor family, Maria assisted her mother in housework and in caring for her five younger siblings

following her father’s death. In 1902, a neighboring farmhand, Alessandro Serenelli, who had made previous inappropriate comments and sexual advances toward her, attempted to rape Maria in her house. When she resisted, Alessandro stabbed her 14 times. After being found bleeding to death, she was rushed to hospital where she forgave Alessandro, saying: “Yes, for the love of Jesus, I forgive him ... and I want him to be with me in paradise.”

Of this example, Dn Peter says: “The young man that murdered Maria was incarcerated for 30 years. Maria’s dying wish to her mother was forgive him. Think about that one for a minute. I’ve gotta forgive the murderer of my daughter? She *struggled and struggled* to come to that forgiveness. Our dear friend who did the murder became so angry with himself that he became an incorrigible prisoner. More brawls than not. Chaplains trying to get through to him, all to no avail. One night he has a dream, and in that dream, he sees Maria giving him 14 daffodils representing forgiveness for the 14 stab wounds. At the same time, the confessor of Maria’s mother walks with her and assists her in finally asking to visit this man. These two people come together. It took time, but eventually trust builds and turns to love. When he gets out of jail, who sponsors him? Maria’s mother. The last 10 years of that guy’s life are spent as a Franciscan lay brother in Rome helping the poor.

“It’s not about being a perfect Church, but a *struggling welcoming struggling* Church.

“What can I as an average Catholic in the pews be doing?” Dn Peter asks self reflectively from the heart. “Two things—study and pray, pray and study. The very first thing is to pray. Look at your gifts and identify where they can be used and seek advice. Not everybody is equipped to go out there [in prison chaplaincy] and do that, but some of us are. Some of us have got those gifts to answer the cry of Jesus: ‘I was in prison and you visited me.... Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these brothers, you did it to me’” (Matthew 25:36–40). ■

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Anne Sutherland is a freelance writer for the Diocese of Wollongong.

Daniel Hopper is the director of media and communications and co-editor of *Journey* for the Diocese of Wollongong.