

Forum 6 – Prison: Failure, Resilience, Hope

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English translation

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased that there is the opportunity at this meeting for peace to also make the voices of prisoners heard. It is important for Christians not to forget prisoners. They are among the poor with whom Jesus identifies in the Gospel of Matthew: "I was in prison and you visited me."

Prisoners need people to take their words outside or to help them put into words what they are feeling and experiencing. One who did this in a wonderful way and was able to do so because he was a man of words was the Protestant theologian and resistance activist Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He is a witness of God's extraordinary presence in prison. Before he was executed in the concentration camp, he was imprisoned here in Berlin. His letters and his poems from prison reflect on the experiences of many prisoners.

Bonhoeffer was innocent. Nevertheless, he sees himself closely connected with every prisoner. Just as Jesus identifies with all prisoners in the same way, Bonhoeffer, the pastor, the man of good family, does not allow any differences. In the poem "Nocturnal Voices in Tegel" he writes:

"We the poor, we the rich, equal in misfortune, we the good, we the evil, whatever we were, ... we the innocent and we the heavily accused, deeply afflicted by long loneliness..."

Loneliness marks everyone. Especially during the first period in pre-trial detention, contact with the outside world is very limited. The loneliness of prisoners whose relatives live abroad or who do not speak the national language is particularly great. Many prisoners lose their connection to the outside world during their time in custody; numerous ties are broken because people live in separate worlds.

Even the presence of other prisoners is often not an adequate response to the loneliness. Recently, a prisoner told me: "Every day I build walls around myself that are higher than those of the prison. When I get bad news, I don't let it show. But in the evening in the cell, that's when the tears come."

The suffering of prisoners is the same everywhere. In total, there are about 1.5 million people in prison in Europe. I would like to present some situations:

While Norway has developed some prisons as models of humane correction, in Sweden prisons have been overcrowded for several years due to the crackdown on gang crime. This has changed everyday prison life a lot. Overcrowding exists in another 13 countries in Europe. This does not only lead to growing tensions, but also to poorer health care, which was particularly evident during the pandemic, as well as a lack of training and jobs or less time to prepare prisoners for release. This is all the more regrettable as these areas are already inadequate everywhere anyway.

In Malta, on the other hand, is where many refugees arrive. They are generally not criminals. But for various reasons they make up a large part of the prison population. Similarly high or even higher percentages of foreigners can be found by many other small states, where the percentage of prisoners without national passports is between 40% and 75%. The large countries of Western Europe are at 30%, while in most Eastern European countries the percentage is much lower. This

situation is a big question for me: many of them are sentenced because of acts related to the poverty they come from; I think of the Roma from Romania, for example, or the Latin American women in Finnish prisons who let themselves be abused as drug mules to feed their families. Or the many who are traumatised because of their life history or their flight experience. The psychiatric care section of Würzburg Prison is full of them. Imprisonment is in no way a solution to their problems. And prisons find it difficult to react to language problems or to deal with people of different cultures.

In French prisons and elsewhere, the question is how to take care of Muslim prisoners and how to avoid radicalisation in detention. This includes the following even more important question: How can these deracinated and often also desperate people be given new orientation and new support?

This is not only a Christian problem. That is why it is important that all actors in pastoral care work together. In addition to Christians, this increasingly includes Muslims or free churches, as in Eastern Europe. This often creates a competitive situation. Instead, one should learn to share the care for the prisoners with each other. Pope Francis says in his encyclical "Fratelli Tutti": "But we must unite in a 'we' that inhabits the common house."

For this, volunteers are also very important. They form a bridge to the outside world. They often take care of prisoners' concrete needs. They can finally have a normal conversation with them. And they come because they care about the prisoners. The gratuitousness plays an enormous role!

Another really big problem is suicides. On average, 5 out of 10,000 prisoners suicide every year in Europe, while the suicide rate for the general population is 1 per 10,000. In addition, there are quite a number of suicide attempts and even more suicidal thoughts. Many take stock. They feel their crime is part of a story of endless failure. Being unable to distract themselves or talk to someone leads to a felt hopelessness.

In February this year, the first assisted suicide occurred in a Swiss prison. A prisoner had claimed the same right for himself as free Swiss citizens are entitled to.

The prison chaplaincy in Switzerland has published a statement on the matter. They point out that death in prison is always fraught with fear. Every death of a fellow prisoner causes shock waves and many prisoners are driven by the fear that a relative could die during their imprisonment. Their statement points out that the situation of detainees is so different from those living outside that the same right constitutes an inequality in this case. In prison, one cannot make free decisions. The psychological pressure is often enormous, one's vision is limited. Prisoners cannot talk to relatives or friends.

Granting a prisoner a right to suicide is tantamount to admitting that one cannot offer a humane alternative for his desperate and hopeless situation.

Bonhoeffer, too, knew mental distress. However, he knew relief from his hardships, so he ends an enumeration with the remark: "Overcoming in prayer".

Prison is indeed a place of prayer! And it is a place of questions. I know of few other places where people ask so intensively about life, about the meaning of life, about guilt and forgiveness, about support and help, about the powers that determine life.

Although prisoners often previously lived in an environment where there was little contact with religion and church, they do not devoid of deep questions about salvation, about getting to know God and being accepted by him. In the trial that is imprisonment, these questions often break through powerfully.

In prison many, whether they had previously been in church circles or had little or no knowledge of the Gospel and a life as a Christian, begin to understand the power of the Bible and to live the faith in new ways. Bonhoeffer himself understood the meaning of Christmas better.

On 17 December 1943, he wrote home: "Probably a more meaningful and genuine Christmas will be celebrated by many in this house here, ... that God turns precisely where men tend to turn away, that Christ was born in a stable because otherwise there was no other space for him in the inn - a prisoner understands this better than anyone else and this is truly good news for him, and by believing, he knows he is placed in the community of Christianity that transcends all spatial and temporal boundaries and the prison walls lose their meaning."

There is something good in every human being, a reflection of God's love.

The Jewish woman Etty Hillesum, who was also imprisoned by the Nazis, wrote in her diary, "The misery is really great," and yet it keeps welling up in my heart, "Life is something glorious and great ..., every further crime, every further cruelty, we must contrast with another bit of love and goodness that we must conquer within ourselves."

What can prisoners do for peace, we may ask? Have not some of them themselves been involved in small-scale wars that they have instigated or fallen victim to?

And yet we can learn from them that in every human being, even in those who have committed a horrendous crime, a reflection of God's goodness is hidden. We can learn to conquer a little bit of love and goodness in ourselves every day. Bonhoeffer ends his poem that I quoted at the beginning with an appeal from the prisoners:

"Brother, we seek, we call you!
Brother, do you hear me?"

I feel this is a request - to me personally, who, like many others, have the privilege of serving in prison - but also to all of us. Thank you very much!