

## ՀԱՅԵՐԵՆԻ ԴՐՔԵՐՑՈՒՄՆԵՐ

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### ARMENIAN PRISON CHAPLAINCY\*

Christian prison ministry is based on the words of the Savior: “I was in prison, and you visited me” (Matthew 25:36). These are the words of the final judgment account, told by St. Matthew, when our Lord identifies Himself with prisoners unfolding the full meaning and the importance of the spiritual service in the prison. Wherever there is a hungry person, a stranger, someone in suffering, a prisoner, there is Christ Himself who awaits our visit and our help. The foundation as well as the ultimate goal of the mission of the Church, including the prison chaplaincy, is the person of Jesus. He is the source of our inspiration in our pastoral ministry, towards Whom we lead the people. Therefore, the all-inspiring figure of Christ is the highest standard, and moreover, He is the ground and purpose for the spiritual care and Church *diakonia*.

There are four important layers that should be looked into through the lens of prison chaplaincy:

- a) Jesus is “the One sent by the Father”,
- b) He is the One who was “in the midst of us”,
- c) He is “the Risen Lord”,
- d) He is “the One who will come”.

These four aspects well describe the Christ as the model and archetype in prison ministry. We should feel that we are also sent into the world with a single mission to offer the Father’s mercy, to come to share in the human condition, to instill the hope of the resurrection against any human failure, and finally, to invite everyone to look beyond the worldly reality to rediscover himself in faith and spiritual reality.

This Christological reference is, therefore, not a mere abstract inspiration for the prison chaplain, but it should be the actual content of his action. We are in prison

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because of Jesus Christ, to bear witness and to proclaim the universal *kerygma*. However, without reducing the human factor in our mission, it needs to be perceived that we are not in prison for “doing good or being pleasant” to the people who are there: we are in prison for and sent by the Lord to bear witness of His love and restore the hope that is promised by the Lord. Everything else derives from this deep understanding.

To summarize my reflections, I want to underline once again that it is of absolute importance to acknowledge the Christological foundation of prison chaplaincy to act not only like the Christ but also as Christ.

Now, allow me to present to you the historical background and share the experience of the prison chaplaincy in the Armenian Church.

Right from the beginning, I have to mention that the 70 years of soviet totalitarian regime played a devastating role in attempting to uproot the faith and Christian values of the people of Armenia and, thus, it created a huge gap and separation between the historical past and today’s reality. The *pastoralia* of the church to various segments of society has been almost eliminated because of the aggressive state propaganda of atheism. It did not circumvent the prison, moreover, it became worst when many were exiled and prisons were filled with the clergy who were labeled as enemies of the people.

After the proclamation of the independence the prison chaplaincy in Armenia has entered a new era. The turning point was in 1993, when one of the dedicated clergyman Fr. Karapet Glejyan responded to the appeal of the Diocesan Primate (now Catholicos of All Armenians Karekin II) and started voluntarily pay visits and serve in the prison. Almost one decade, through his personal means he visited one of the prisons, in the meanwhile, tried to reach out to the rest of the prisons existing in Armenia. As a result, the prisoners built a large church, a meeting room, a library and reading hall and most importantly a group of people created a community of faith within the boundaries of the prison.

The next milestone was in 2003, when in the Spiritual Center of our Church the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin the Prison Chaplaincy Department was established.

Today there are 12 prisons with 4500 prisoners. Although there are 8 pastors – 5 ordained priests and 3 deacons who serve in the prison chaplaincy, it is not enough to reach out to all and fulfill their spiritual needs. There are 4 churches, 4 chapels and 3 prayer rooms; the libraries are being supplemented by spiritual literature.

Gradually we are trying to break the stereotypes of soviet propaganda about faith and spirituality. The most eloquent evidence of this transition and transformation is the fact that recently in the women’s prison, on the pinnacle of Lenin’s monument a monument of cross was erected symbolizing the end of the past mentality.

I am very delighted to mention that a recent survey among the prisoners, done

by an international organization, has shown very positive results that prove the productive work of our prison chaplaincy during the 20 years of its foundation. The vast majority of the participants had mentioned about the absolute importance of spiritual care among other services that prison provides.

Our prison chaplaincy is working on three directions: 1) prisoners, 2) the staff, 3) families

Let me give you a brief account of our work content.

1. Prisoners – our aim is to restore their human dignity, return and fully integrate them in the society as a healed and renewed person. Thus we have organized

a) Bible Studies, teaching the Word of God. Through the Biblical teachings we bring them into the deep realization of their situation, full understanding of their committed crime and repentance and spiritual recovery.

b) Prayer and liturgical life. Faith remains a theory, if it is not expressed through sincere prayer. The celebration of the Eucharist is the center of the pastoral work of the chaplain in prison that creates sense of fulfillment and satisfaction, it shapes the community gathered around the story of salvation. At the liturgical level we underline the significance of the sacrament of penance, which takes the human pain and sin, into the realm of God's mercy. This urges us to consider the high responsibility of the chaplain in guiding them through penitential experience. It is done with great care and caution not to cause further suffering to the inflicted, who are deprived of freedom, affected by loneliness and condemned morally. It is very gratifying that there are many who ask for our spiritual care, we have performed baptisms for the prisoners as well as for their families. It is a completely new phenomenon to officiate the sacrament of matrimony in the jail.

2. Administrative staff: Firstly, we have to establish that those who supervise the prisoners also need spiritual guidance in their most difficult and stressful work.

Second, The prison system still has not completely freed itself from the old soviet stereotypes, which are related to the rights of the prisoners, jail conditions and the ultimate purpose of the system. Today, the prison system plays the mere role of isolating the criminals from the society. The entire human and financial resources are allocated for maintenance and security purposes. The administration is perceived as watch-guard only. Therefore, our main task is to work on changing this stagnated mentality.

The desirable system that we have in our vision revolves around two important pillars: on one hand to protect the society from potential threats, on the other, to reintegrate in the society those who have committed crime. These both factors are very important, to strike the right balance between exercising the letter of law to protect the society and not to violate the human rights and dignity of detainees. The degradation of prisons can make detention even more bitter. We receive a lot of

letters from prisoners who mention that they undergo a “double penalty” because of the conditions and the behavior of the staff.

3. Families: The detention of a family member leaves a negative impact on the entire household. It affects them morally, psychologically, spiritually, economically and socially. In many cases it causes divorces, the children are left without parental care and potentially may become criminals. The heavy financial burden hinders them to receive not only higher education but in some cases it becomes a problem for getting education even on elementary level. Therefore, it has been already 3 years that we have established a special program called “Provide Aide to Families”, which has spiritual, educational, socio-economic direction and we work with the families in collaboration with the local communities.

To conclude, I want to mention, that the most consoling reward we get is when a prisoner after his or her release does not return back to prison being fully integrated in the society. The statistics show that 10-15% of those who come out of jail stay in contact with their chaplains or get involved in their parish life.

Yes, there are criminals but they are not hopelessly unchangeable. The path to healing and restoring the human dignity is in the confessional response to our Lord's invitation. “Go, your faith has made you well”(Mark 10:52)

### ԱՄՓՈՓՈՒՄ

Նոգեոր ծառայությունը բանում, աստվածաբանական-հովվական փեսանկյունից պետք է հիմնվի Տիտուս Բրիսարոսի անձի ու գործի վրա: Այլ խոսքով, այն պետք է ունենա քրիստոսաբանական դրսևորում ու հիմք:

Նայասրանի բանություն իրականացվող հոգեոր ծառայությունը հենց այս գաղափարականով ու փեսականով է ավելի քան երկու փաստամյակ առաջնորդվում: Խորհրդային վարչակարգի ժամանակ սրելով անբարենպաստ պայմանները հաղթահարվեցին միայն 1993 թ., երբ Արարարյան հայրապետական թեմի առաջնորդական փոխանորդ Ս. Գարեգին արք. Ներսիսյանի (այժմ Գարեգին Բ Կաթողիկոս Ամենայն Տայոց) փնտրիությամբ թեմի հոգեոր սպասավորներից Ս. Կարապետ ավ. քին. Գլրնճյանն սկսեց այցելել Ն՝ բանտեր: 2003 թ. Մայր Աթոռում հաստատվեց Բանտերի հոգեոր ծառայության եւ հովվության հարուկ գրասենյակ: Ներկայումս գրասենյակում գործում են ութ սպասավոր՝ հինգ քահանա եւ երեք սարկավագ: Առաքելությունն իրականացվում է երեք հիմնական ուղղություններով՝ բանտարկյալներ, բանտերի վարչակազմ եւ բանտարկյալների ընտանիքներ: