

PRISON VISITING

Interview: I have with me now Fr. Patrick Cope who is a Prison Visitor and a Prison Chaplain. Fr. Patrick, how do you see visiting people in prison as part of your Christian vocation?

R. Well, I think it is a response to that gospel invitation to reach out to those in need, to those who are marginalised which does include those in prison. Also, for me as a Christian, it is a practical way to put my faith into action.

Q. So when you go into a prison what is your attitude to the people who are in there, because a lot of them, most of them, in fact all of them, are there because they have done something wrong?

R. Yes, whether you go in as a Chaplain or someone from a local parish to visit a prisoner, you are actually going in, not to make a judgement and not to condemn, that has, in fact, already been done in the name of society through the courts. You're going in, as a Christian, to show that this person, this man or woman in prison still has a dignity as a human being. They still have needs, and many of the people who are in prison, even though they have done things wrong, many of them are from very poor backgrounds, whether it be materially poor or emotionally poor. They have many great needs and as Christians we can help to support them.

Q. Father, you have got a specific task as a Chaplain. As you say, there are possibly prison visitors from parishes as well, but for young people who feel they are being called to be a Christian and act out their Christianity, what can they do?

R. Well, it obviously depends how young you are, because there are certain rules and regulations within a prison. I have brought sixth formers into the prison where they helped to become part of a youth group. Young people can become aware of what happens once a prisoner is put into prison, behind the high wall, behind the fence, they tend to be forgotten. It is important to be aware of this; after all, some of them later on may have friends who end up in prison. They can pray for the people in prison, for those who are working in prison, for staff and chaplains. They may wish to in sending a letter, perhaps through the school or through the Chaplain or perhaps a Christmas card, a birthday card, because many people in prison actually do not have families to visit them so that is a real need.

TASKS

1. For Fr. Patrick, being a prison Chaplain is a practical way of putting his faith into action. Try to explain, with some examples, what he means by this.
2. Do you think prisoners are likely to welcome a visit from a Chaplain? Give reasons for your answer.
3. There is a growing shortage of priests today, so should they be devoting time to visiting those in prison? In your answer try to consider more than one point of view.