

Why we need prison chaplains: reflections on a visit to Halden Prison, Norway

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Dr Lewis Owens

Last year, I commenced a project looking at the relationship between prison life, addiction and spirituality. Having started volunteering at HMP Pentonville and becoming more aware of the important work done by the Prisoners' Education Trust,¹ I decided that the best way for me to explore these different yet interlinked subjects was in the form of a short historical novel. After examining the documents detailing the opening of the 'experimental' Pentonville prison in 1842, I was struck by the central role played by the chaplaincy but also the fears regarding its negative effects: the inaugural chaplain, Rev James Ralph, was dismissed by the Chairman of the Pentonville Management Committee, Lord Wharncliffe, a little over a year after the prison opening, due to concerns about religious coercion towards the inmates.²

I chose the main thread of the novel – the 'hook' on which the action focuses – to be *The Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola, which take the reader through a series of explorative, practical steps for up to 30 days in order to discern the will of God. Ignatius, a 16th century Spanish soldier, priest and founder of the Society of Jesus (now known as the Jesuits), himself experienced prison during persecution for his faith. Yet the story is also crucially about people – three in particular who are subjected to an 'experiment' – their personal journeys and their struggles with addiction. I was already familiar with similarities between the routine and discipline of *The Spiritual Exercises* and the 12-Step programme of Alcoholics Anonymous: the founder of AA, Bill Wilson, had engaged in fascinating correspondence about these apparently coincidental similarities with a Jesuit Priest, Fr Ed Dowling, in the late 1940s and early 1950s.³ Furthermore, I was also aware of Wilson's correspondence with the Swiss psychologist G.C. Jung, specifically on the question of alcohol addiction⁴, and given Jung's own interest in the Ignatian *Exercises*,⁵ it seemed to me a justifiable, albeit largely unexplored, link to use this historical framework to devise a plot centring on prison and addiction within the Victorian period yet also, hopefully, imbued with a contemporary relevance.

¹ See <https://www.prisonerseducation.org.uk/news/writer-plans-100-mile-run-for-pet->

² For more information on the central role played by the chaplaincy at Pentonville in the 1840s and 1850s, see Joseph Kingsmill, *Chapters on Prisons and Prisoners, and the Prevention of Crime*. London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1854. The results of separate confinement, specifically at Pentonville, were addressed further by Kingsmill's assistant chaplain and successor, Rev John T. Burt, in his *Results of the System of Separate Confinement As Administered at the Pentonville Prison* of 1852. See also chapters 3 and 4 of my forthcoming novel *The Pentonville Experiment*.

³ See *The Soul of Sponsorship: The Friendship of Fr Ed Dowling, S.J., and Bill Wilson in Letters*. Robert Fitzgerald, S.J., Hazelden, 1995.

⁴ Replying to a letter from Bill Wilson, Jung replied, on January 30, 1961: "You see, Alcohol in Latin is 'spiritus' and you use the same word for the highest religious experience as well as for the most depraving poison. The helpful formula therefore is: spiritus contra spiritum."

⁵ From June 1939 to March 1940, Jung gave a series of 20 lectures on *The Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius at the Zurich Institute of Technology.

So why Halden Prison, two hours south of Oslo, Norway? It started with a visit to the Jesuit Society of Britain in London, where I met with Fr Paul Nicolson SJ. My aim was simply to make sure that I had an accurate understanding behind the practicalities of running an Ignatian 30-day retreat. What would the process be from day to day? How would the *Exercises* have been implemented 175 years ago? After a very enjoyable and productive meeting, it seemed to me that I had all the information that I needed. On leaving, however, Fr Paul quietly asked me: “You know they already run such retreats in some Scandinavian prisons?” I didn’t know and immediately sat back down as he kindly offered to print out a couple of articles published in the Jesuit Journal *The Way*. These articles, “When Cell Doors Close and Hearts Open”⁶ and “Taking the Next Step”⁷ written by Dutch psychologist Lyzanne Sizoo, concern an initiative set up in 2001, within the grounds of Kumla Prison in Sweden, to run retreats based on *The Spiritual Exercises*.

Directed initially by Fr Truls Bernhold (who has subsequently retired yet remains very active in prison chaplaincy), the retreats offer long-serving inmates the chance to embark on a 30-day series of meditations and reflections away from their usual cells and routine, in a separate part of the prison suitably called ‘the monastery’. This simple and minimalistic annex to the main prison, initially funded by the Christian Council of Sweden, consists of nine accommodation rooms and seven meditation rooms. The inmates need not have any specific faith (the retreat has been attended by Muslims, Buddhists and atheist prisoners) but rather, according to Fr Truls, “the willingness to look inside themselves and, in the words of Ignatius, conquer themselves.”⁸ Although a Christian minister himself, Fr Truls is at pains to stress that the use of *The Spiritual Exercises* is not intended to convert inmates to the Christian faith, but rather to explore biblical readings and parables in the light of their own life-experiences: “In Christian teaching knowledge is offered from the outside in; during the retreats the teaching comes from within.”⁹ It is essentially, therefore, the start of a long journey seeking to provide hope and meaning to life, by means of self-reflection and meditation, both inside the prison and upon release back into society.¹⁰

In her articles, Sizoo documents the quite remarkable, positive results that many of the inmates at Kumla have experienced, as well as the inevitable challenges involved in returning to ‘normal’ prison life after such a spiritual ‘oasis’. Naturally, given the subject of my novel, I was intrigued and after speaking with both Sizoo and Fr Truls I was put in contact with Tone Kaufmann, Associate Professor at the Norwegian School of Theology in Oslo. In her 2017 article “Old Practices in New Places: Breaking Violence through Ignatian Exercises in a Swedish Maximum Security Prison”,¹¹ Kaufmann draws on the work of Sizoo and Fr Truls in Sweden but mentions also the more recent retreats that have been initiated at Halden Prison. Kaufmann is a theologian rather than a criminologist; nevertheless, she offers perceptive

⁶ *The Way*, 43/4 (October, 2004), 161-168.

⁷ *The Way*, 49/1, 2010.

⁸ Sizoo, ‘When Doors Close’

⁹ Sizoo, ‘Taking the Next Step’ p. 99.

¹⁰ After release from Kumla, ex-inmates can apply to attend another spiritual retreat at Skänninge, which has eighteen spaces, or those with less than one year before release can request continued spiritual guidance in supervised accommodation in Vedstena, close to Kumla. See Sizoo, “Taking the Next Step.”

¹¹ *Spiritus* 17 (2017): 20-39.

psychological insights. In particular, her emphasis is on the inmate as a ‘shattered and vulnerable self’ seeking a ‘safe space’ from where to begin to assuage feelings of guilt and shame.¹² Such retreats as those in Kumla and Halden, which use the adaptable Ignatian *Exercises*, Kaufmann argues, can provide the tools for inmates to process painful experiences and make positive sense of their incarceration. In short, the emphasis is on rehabilitation, not punishment.

Halden Prison was opened in 2010. It is a high-security prison housing 250 inmates (with around 50% of them non-Norwegian citizens), with sentences ranging from 6 months to 21 years, the maximum term awarded in Norway.¹³ The Prison commenced a 14-day Ignatian retreat in 2013, which was increased to the current 21 days the following year, accommodating six inmates specifically chosen by a designated steering committee. Much has already been written about the facilities at Halden Prison and more generally about the humane prison approach of Norway.¹⁴ Not so much, however, is known specifically about the Ignatian retreats in Halden and so I will focus briefly on the work of Vegard Holm, a PhD student at the Norwegian School of Theology, whose work in progress is a fascinating mixture of theoretical exposition and experimental analysis of those undertaking the retreats.

Holm kindly shared with me some of his current findings from an unpublished paper, “Experiences from a Ritual of Forgiveness: An empirical study of the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius conducted in a Norwegian Prison.”¹⁵ It would, of course, be unfair and unethical of me to declare any of Holm’s results before they are published; it suffices to say that he asks a simple yet poignant question within the article and his overall work: “How is the ritual of forgiveness experienced by the participants and what characterizes these experiences?” By interviewing the six inmates immediately before, after and then one year subsequently (hence eighteen interviews in total), he uses the framework of Norwegian theologian Jan-Olav Henriksen to conceptualise how the inmates experience the ritual of forgiveness through their self-examination, self-interpretation and perceived transformation. As with Kumla, the retreat at Halden is not restricted to Christian believers (one of Holm’s subjects is Muslim, who receives a blessing rather than communion during Mass) but is rather directed at long-serving inmates who wish, according to Halden’s steering committee, “to confront themselves, get help to live responsibly, as well as cope with life in a better way after they are released from prison.”¹⁶

The train journey from Oslo to Halden changes landscape from fjord to forest as one travels south towards the Swedish border. I was very grateful to be met at the station by Jo Inge

¹² Kaufmann “Old Practices” p.20.

¹³ Only the most serious criminals will serve the maximum twenty-one years (which can, and often is in serious cases, extended for a further five years every five years).

¹⁴ See, for example, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2012/may/18/halden-most-humane-prison-in-world> and <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-43261564/is-this-a-luxury-prison>. Additionally, the work of Pernilla Johansson and Dr Sarah Lewis is both highly relevant and important. Lewis’ work on personal growth is particularly fascinating. See <http://www.blurb.co.uk/b/7425681-halden-prison> for some wonderful visual images of Halden.

¹⁵ At the point of writing, Holm’s article is under review for submission.

¹⁶ Generally, inmates will have already served at least a third of their sentence. At present, no child abusers or sexual offenders are permitted onto the retreat.

Bolstad, chaplain of Halden, and driven for the twenty or so minutes to the prison. The prison itself still retains its new freshness (it is only ten years old, compared to the 175-year-old building of Pentonville) and although there is the traditionally surrounding and protective barbed-wire, there is also a natural border comprised of pine trees, which reminds one that Halden is not urban (neither is, of course, much of Norway). This becomes more meaningful before the Sunday morning chapel services when inmates will walk in this open air (still contained within the prison walls) towards the multi-faith 'Holy Room,' which seats up to thirty inmates.¹⁷ Here, inmates will often sit and reflect, their gaze focused on a commissioned work of art of meditative changing colours adorning the back wall.



The approach into Halden

The layout of the retreat itself remains very much in accordance with the rest of the prison but in a self-contained wing: six rooms to accommodate the inmates (the wing is used as a normal part of the prison at all other times). A communal kitchen, run by two previous participants, is established and the usually present TV is removed for the entirety of the retreat. As well as a kitchen, the room is also used for group discussion, periods of reflection and individual spiritual direction. Adjacent to the wing, and reserved solely for the use of the

¹⁷ Larger services, for example those at Christmas, take place in the large gymnasium close by.

participants, is a small garden yielding herbs and a pond, around which there is seating, where further self-reflection is encouraged before inmates return to their cells for the evening.



The forecourt of Halden Prison

There are subtle differences between the retreats at Kumla and Halden, but the routine is largely the same: reflection, prayers, meditation, readings and individual spiritual direction. Apart from the slightly longer retreat length at Kumla (30 days as opposed to Halden's 21) there is also a slightly different use of colour codes to symbolise the process through which the inmates go.

The retreat at Halden starts with the 'red' period. This is when inmates are reminded that, in spite of their crimes and their past, they are loved, valued and desired into being by God. It is this foundation of love and being loved, Jo Inge Bolstad explained to me, which must be established before any self-examination can start. After the first seven days, therefore, when this foundation has been established, inmates enter a more challenging and deeper 'black' period, where they are called upon to examine their sins (crimes) and to take responsibility for the consequences these may have had. During this 'black' period, all six inmates wear black T-shirts with the words 'brotherhood, good choices, new start' adorning the back, as a reminder of both the communal and cathartic nature of the retreat. Naturally, this is a highly

emotional period for the inmates (and for the two spiritual directors, too, who also have to examine their own sins and shortcomings). As an antidote to such confession and soul-searching, particular Psalms are chosen (e.g. Psalms 71 and 16), which have a positive emphasis on forgiveness and reassurance of God's presence. The following day, inmates (and, again, spiritual directors too) are encouraged to write their most painful sins on paper and place them in a sealed envelope. This envelope is then nailed to a large cross taken from the Holy Room, outside in a small open space, before being placed into a metal bin and ceremoniously burned. During this time, Jo Inge told me, the inmates hold hands and silence prevails, before applause often spontaneously breaks out. Silence then ensues once more as the inmates try to process the emotional journey on which they have embarked, particularly reflecting on the last few days.¹⁸



The 'Holy Room'

These days of 'confession' and 'forgiveness' mark the transition from the 'black' stage to the third stage – the 'white' period, where selected parables are read and examined, all with a

¹⁸ Not that everything goes smoothly, of course, and Jo Inge told me about two instances that highlight the new sensitivity that marks the inmates' thinking during this period: one envelope was nailed to a knot in the wood of the cross and subsequently fell; another envelope failed to adequately catch fire in the bucket. Both were deemed as 'negative signs' by the respective inmates and the process had to be repeated. See Kjell Arnold Nyhus : *Hvis Jeg Har En Sjel – Fortellinger fra klosteret i fengselet* ("If I Have a Soul - Stories from the Convent in the Prison").

focus on being lost, found and reconciled (most usually the Parables of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin and the Prodigal Son). This is a period when inmates can imaginatively reinterpret biblical stories and readings to fit their own experiences. The final period – the ‘blue’ period – centres on ‘resurrection’ and ‘new life’: a symbolic re-enactment of the Easter period during the long Nordic summer. The spiritual directors even wash the feet of the inmates to prepare them for their return back to their ‘normal’ cell and new life as ‘clean’ individuals ready to serve others who will be, until their release, their fellow inmates and officers.

The retreat naturally works in different ways, and at different paces, for different individuals and Holm’s research shows the fascinating variety of ways our human psychology interprets questions of forgiveness. For one, it may simply be reconciliation with his own past; for another a renewed relationship with his family whom he interprets as ‘God’. For one of Holm’s subjects, for whom the feeling of being forgiven is still a challenge, a regular ritual of lighting a candle for his victim is the essential ingredient he has taken away from the retreat. Even improved self-esteem and a heightened understanding of how to relate to others is a triumph. On my departure from Halden, Jo Inge Bolstad left me with an example of one young man, who entered the retreat with his hood up, his shoulders hunched and his expression sour. “After two weeks, his hood was down and his shoulders up – he was even smiling.”

Many inmates clearly were the recipients of violated and unloved childhoods and find it extremely difficult to remove a façade of toughness, especially in prison. As one inmate and participant of the Kumla retreat observed, “some have never had a hug.” As a result of experiencing abuse and neglect during their formative years, the prisoners’ self-esteem is often extremely low. Low self-esteem cannot, of course, justify crime nor will inmates be transformed overnight after twenty or thirty years of fear and lack of trust, but seeds can be sown. Like all seeds, these can be the smallest of things, such as calling inmates by their first names, rather than nicknames, or holding hands before meals to stress the communality of the retreat. The aim is to reconcile inmates with themselves, with significant others, and with those they have violated.¹⁹

Norway has one of the lowest reoffending rates in the world and one can’t help thinking it is their emphasis on rehabilitation rather than punishment that is crucial in achieving this low statistic.²⁰ For many, years of guilt and shame cannot be undone in a three or four-week retreat and rarely are there flashes of divine revelation. Rather, it marks the start of a long process which the inmates readily, and painfully, embark upon with the desire to make amends, never to return to prison, and to act finally as responsible members of society.²¹

¹⁹ There is always the question of how to term those within prison: ‘prisoners’, ‘offenders’, ‘inmates’? At Halden, they often used the positive and respectful term, ‘client’, suggesting the idea of service.

²⁰ <https://www.catch-22.org.uk/news/rehabilitation-at-the-heart-of-the-prison-system-what-we-can-learn-from-norway/>

²¹ Lars Martin Dahl, an old school friend and Priest of Grónland Church in Oslo, told me of the collaboration that the parish of Gamlebyen and Grónland have with the Norwegian Kriminalomsorgen: “Convicts who are not sent to prison can work in various social schemes, including Grónland Church. The convict usually works with

It has already been shown how chaplaincies can play a positive role in the well-being of prisoners²² but the standard Protestant sermon or Catholic Mass once a week is doubtless insufficient to facilitate internal change and questioning, particularly when it comes to the poignant issue of forgiveness. This requires intense spiritual direction and guidance and the results of Kumla in Sweden and Halden in Norway suggest that the effort is more than worthwhile. Yet prison chaplaincies in the UK are under-staffed and under-resourced (as with many other chaplaincies in hospitals, universities, armed forces, etc.) and until more is invested in the mental and spiritual health of inmates, as is done in Scandinavia, then it is unlikely that the tragically high suicide rates or alarmingly consistent reoffending rates in the UK will drop. Nevertheless, I believe that the prison chaplain is as important today as ever: their role extends far beyond conducting liturgical services on a Sunday morning and more into a beacon of compassion and understanding.²³ But who would wish to be a prison chaplain when our emphasis remains on punishment rather than rehabilitation, despair rather than hope, guilt rather than forgiveness? In my experience, many inmates see the chaplaincy as ‘just another place’ inside the prison: they are filed out of their cells, into the chapel ‘space’ and filed back again: the prison architecture necessitates this. Yet the chapel can, and should, also be a space ‘outside’ of the prison and the short walk that the inmates in Halden take from their rooms (they are not ‘cells’) to the chapel is a positive metaphor for this open space. Naturally in older prisons like Pentonville, where the chapel formed a central focus within a panoptic design, this is not possible unless new buildings are built or existing ones converted, but with obvious current problems of overcrowding this seems unlikely. Nevertheless, there are signs that newly built prisons are increasingly considering the physical and psychological impact of space, which is very welcome.²⁴

Religious traditionalists may feel uncomfortable with the flexible, ‘post-modern’ use of the Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises* and claim that the essence of Christianity is being diluted by allowing inmates to reinterpret the biblical stories in the light of their own experiences. Yet many inmates have had little access to established religion growing up and trying to ‘convert’ them is not only unrealistic and unethical, it is simply wrong. No one would wish to return to the religious coercion that plagued the opening couple of years at Pentonville in the early 1840s. Like the suggested ‘Higher Power’ of the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, though, many will choose ‘a God of their own understanding’ (Love, family, even the pine trees surrounding the prison), from which to start an often virginal exploration of spirituality. And,

odd jobs around the church (painting, light carpentry, etc.) but mainly with Mass on Sundays, where they give out psalm books, welcome the congregation and help with ‘tea and biscuits’ after Mass. In Grónland Church, ‘tea and biscuits’ is often soup, as several of those who come to Mass are hungry. By working with ‘tea and biscuits’ the convict is involved in meaningful work which they regard as important to them.”

²² Thomas P O’Connor and Michael Perreyclear, ‘Prison Religion in Action and its Influence on Offender Rehabilitation’, *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 2002, vol 35 no 3–4, pp 11–33.

²³ On my first visit to Pentonville I was given a tour of the wings by the Roman Catholic Chaplain Fr Stephen Coker. During the tour an officer relayed to him a request from an inmate who was seeking to find a couple of Psalms to console him through bereavement.

²⁴ The work of Yvonne Jewkes and Helen Johnston regarding prison ‘space’ is particularly interesting. See, for example, their article ‘The evolution of prison architecture’ in *The Handbook on Prisons* (2007, ed. Jewkes) pp 174-196.

like the characters in my novel, struggling with guilt, fear and addiction, that journey can lead to positive and hopeful places.

Dr Lewis Owens is an education consultant and writer. He volunteers at HMPPS Pentonville and Feltham. His novel 'The Pentonville Experiment' will be available to download from September, with all proceeds going to The Forward Trust, helping inmates break the cycle of addiction and crime. He would like to express his sincere gratitude to Fr Paul Nicholson SJ, Fr Stephen Coker, Lysanne Sizoo, Fr Truls Bjorkland, Prof Tone Kaufmann, Vegard Holm, Rev Jo Inge Bolstad and Rev Lars Martin Dahl.

