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**COMMUNITY LIFE IN PRISON**

A talk by

**Franck Chaigneau**

Prison chaplain

**and others from the prison environment**

13 December, 2001

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**Overview**

Can community life develop in an environment such as a prison which is very restrictive ? Prison is a reflection of society, with its groupings, its hierarchies, its power struggles, its rules, but also with its outcasts and its prosperous inmates. Community life can be expressed in many ways : in religious practices, in sporting activities, in discussion or training groups, and also in the cell shared with other prisoners, in the so-called 'divisions' where all contacts take shape, and in the courtyard during walks. Prison staff and volunteers take part in this community life and each person has his own role to play. Several opinions are expressed in this discussion concerning the prisoners' lot and the role played by their wardens and other persons, volunteers etc. However, the question remains : what is the purpose of prisons ?

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## TALK

**Franck Chaigneau** : Having run a company to facilitate social rehabilitation, the *Table de Cana*<sup>1</sup>, I became chaplain in a prison for criminals serving sentences of less than five years (*maison d'arrêt*). In my case, the change was not significant. I had come across roughly the same sorts of people in difficulty previously.

There are large and small prisons. At Fleury-Mérogis, for example, there are about 5,000 people, prisoners and warders altogether. Added to this number, there are those who are authorised to be within the prison walls. The prisoners are grouped according to the lay-out of the buildings into units called 'blocks'. There are about 200 prisoners in a block.

I shall begin by describing the work of the chaplaincy. I think it is useful to get a broader picture by subsequently introducing the accounts of two warders, a former prisoner, a psychologist and a sociologist. These talks will be anonymous.

### **How to nourish a Christian community**

Chaplains are recognised by the State. They are priests, deacons, lay people or nuns. They are helped by a chaplain assistant. They work together but are assigned to different blocks. Their main objective is to meet prisoners on an individual basis. Prison administration encourages this contact by giving them a key to all the cells in a block. In this way, we can meet prisoners either in their cells if they are alone, or if not, we have the use of an office for one-to-one meetings. The chaplain can neither enter nor leave the block without the presence of a warder. The chaplains also organise religious celebrations and their assistants lead Bible groups or other activities.

As far as I am concerned, I work more towards the creation of a Christian community and the personal spiritual development of each prisoner. I ask the prisoners to become members of a Christian community within each block, in other words, to become able to find freedom within a closed setting and to seek peace in a violent world. The prisoners are hard towards each other and there are tensions with other people in the prison environment. Nevertheless, everyone should be able to live together respecting the rules. These people want to learn to live with themselves, with others and with their victims who are often present in their thoughts, as well as with God. They should try to work towards the growth of the Christian community in prison, at least within the confined setting of their cell.

### **An oppressive environment**

Among the tensions which exist between prisoners, the hostility towards sexual offenders – the so-called 'ponces' – is the most apparent. In a prison, there is a hierarchy of prisoners : at the top, there are the most serious offenders who have robbed banks or attacked important institutions, or even, in the process, killed or injured policemen. Next are the minor crooks and then the pimps. At the very bottom of the ladder are the paedophiles. The ponces are despised by the serious offenders and this can lead to trouble : whenever they can, they attack them to such an extent that some ponces no longer dare to go out for the courtyard walk or take a shower alone.

The delay caused by administrative matters creates the opportunity for violence to occur. Before being able to book a room for a Bible group discussion or for a new chaplaincy assistant to be granted prison access, there are months of negotiations. If by chance the warders hold a demonstration, everything comes to a standstill. The planned activities do not take place because it is impossible to get into the prison. Everything takes a long time to happen, and is a source of frustration and conflict.

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<sup>1</sup> Franck Chaigneau, *De l'entreprise d'insertion à l'insertion par l'entreprise*, Breakfast Discussions, Review of the École de Paris du management, Vol. II (ref : CF281195).

## **What I ask of the Christian prison population**

Prisoners are enveloped by this atmosphere. I ask the prisoners, especially those who are in the Christian community, to pay attention to new inmates in order to help them integrate. They do not know the prison, they have no money – if they have to ask for money from friends outside the prison, they have to wait at least a fortnight – there is nothing in the cell, no television, no means of making a cup of coffee, nothing. Luckily, in certain wings, thanks to the solidarity of other prisoners, new inmates have everything they need to make a cup of coffee and wash themselves. When one arrives in a *maison d'arrêt*, in general one arrives with nothing at all since it was so unexpected.

I also ask the Christians to look after those who are depressed, those who are sick or those who are rejected. If they have the financial means, I ask them to share their money with those less well-off. It is possible to buy some products listed by the administration, which allows some of them never to have to eat prison food since they are able to cook their own meals, whereas others have absolutely nothing ; One even has to pay for television in the cell.

I expect the following from the Christian prisoners : respect for the prison environment, for the warders, and for the other prisoners without forgetting their own spiritual life. Finally, I strongly recommend that they prepare themselves for when they leave the *maison d'arrêt*.

As for their participation in religious activities, it is not my overriding objective. Obviously it is good if they come to Mass because this can help them keep up their desire to live a Christian way of life, but more importantly I hope that a community spirit and attention to others becomes established.

### **Concrete actions**

The Christian community which I try to generate offers a number of activities :

- a Round Table about Faith. This is an institution created by the community itself and brought to life by prisoners using themes which they have chosen themselves. It meets once a month for a short period usually run by a prisoner or sometimes by an outside speaker. Afterwards everyone is invited to voice his opinion and a discussion ensues airing different points of view ;
- a Bible group ;
- a choir to sing at Mass ;
- a group which builds scenes of biblical themes using traditional methods, starting with the Christmas Nativity scene ;
- a group of helpers who prepare Mass which I conduct every Friday afternoon ;
- and finally, Sunday Mass : the liturgy and hymns are chosen by the prisoners themselves and takes place in the presence of a chaplain or a chaplaincy assistant.

Of the 200 people in my block, about fifty have put their names down to come to Mass, and 25 to 30 of those actually come. The different activity groups concern between 30 to 40 people altogether.

### **The prisoners and the chaplaincy assistant**

Finally, these prisoners organise themselves, meet up, and some take on responsibilities. I depend heavily on one of them to organise all the activities and encourage others to take part. It is a problem to find people who are able to carry out responsibilities on a continuous basis in this environment where one is necessarily preoccupied by personal problems. However, thinking and prayer help, and some people feel motivated to keep a watch over the quality of life of the Christian community in the prison. A prisoner is nominated 'chaplaincy assistant' by the administration, his name having been put forward by the chaplain. He is a sort of 'super sexton'.

## The warders' view

**A female warden :** I do not pretend to talk for the whole prison personnel and so what I have to say is my personal point of view. Having said that, my colleague and I gladly take part in this discussion with the consent of the prison administration.

### *The role of the warders*

One often hears that someone is in prison because he chose to do so by breaking the law. In reality, all those in prison are deprived of freedom against their will. They arrive with their individual case histories, their ability to revolt, to manipulate and to change. The warden has to exert his authority on each of these people so that the prison environment is respected. The warden should constantly maintain a balance between understanding the prisoner and reminding him of the rules.

Generally speaking, a warden should :

- maintain order ;
- ensure security inside the establishment ;
- play a role in the rehabilitation of the prisoner. This is a relatively recent role : the warden no longer just spends his time opening and closing doors.

### *Community lives*

In prison, several different individual lives juxtapose or intermingle. A prisoner who is brutally isolated from his normal social life wants to recreate a life within the prison which acts as a substitute. Even if he is isolated from society, he cannot escape from the *milieu* to which he belongs. Therefore, he will try to reproduce his style of life, and exert his authority over his fellow prisoners either forcefully or by seduction. He will find old acquaintances and create new ones, drawn together by personality or by geographical, cultural or professional origins, or perhaps even by a common punishment. He wants to communicate with others in his mother tongue, share the same interests, for instance music such as rap, sport, or culinary interests. Prisoners are also interested in the many differences. They will discover other cultures or people whom they would never have met had they not been in prison. Some will convert to another religion. Is it by conviction ? Is it to integrate with the majority ? Or is it the result of lack of family presence ?

### *Preparing for rehabilitation*

The aim of imprisonment is not only to remove harmful individuals from society, but also to try to prepare them better for their subsequent reintroduction into society and to enhance future security. This is why the warden should also prepare the prisoner for his rehabilitation.

Not all the activities in prison are compulsory, as is the courtyard walk. Some prisoners will take part in the community life of the prison out of concern to improve themselves, others in order to reduce the length of their sentence. However, it is essential that their approach is voluntary. If the prisoner has rights, he should also become aware of his duties, a fact which is very important for his social rehabilitation.

### *Work*

The prisoner can improve his lot by means of working. Although the payment is negligible, there is no reason to despise those who work for a pittance. Some prisoners do not have the choice : they have to send money to their families, or compensate their victims, or reimburse their passport costs. Others decide to work in order to improve their day-to-day life, to eat food which the prison does not provide, to buy cigarettes, to watch television, or to improve their dress. Prison is a true reflection of society with both its destitute population and those who are well-off.

### *Other activities*

The prisoner can also join religious groups, exchange stories and ideas and to try to become aware both on an individual and a collective level of the moral obligations which should model his behaviour by helping him distinguish right from wrong – this is what the law is about – for himself and in order to live in society.

He can also study, take part in qualifying training programmes which will be useful for his rehabilitation, or see a psychologist or a psychiatrist to become aware of his wrong-doing.

### *A successful rehabilitation*

Be they professionals or volunteers, all those who interact with the prisoners respect their personality and encourage them in the community life of the prison in order to prepare them for their successful return to society. Unfortunately, in the current state of affairs, their actions are still not concerted enough.

### *Places of community life*

**A male warder :** The cell is the initial place of community life if it is shared with several prisoners. This is very often the case in the *maisons d'arrêt*. On the next level, there is the floor, where material things are exchanged, such as cigarettes and where a personality or a reputation can be created, can assert itself or can fade away. Next, but to a lesser extent, there is the whole block. Prisoners can only meet other prisoners regularly during the walk and since those who have their walk at the same time are always from the same floors, this limits the opportunities for meeting others.

All the rooms where activities take place, the places of worship, the library, the video studio, the sports hall and the weights room, the classrooms, the computer room, and the chess room are also places where people can meet and where community life becomes established. People from the same group meet here to get away from their cells. The walk is perhaps the most important moment of community life in prison. There are also places where there are meetings with families or with lawyers, or where one can meet people from other blocks and therefore make new acquaintances.

### *Community life and those who are active in prisons*

Community life in prison is not just about prisoners. All the internal or external participants are also part of the scene :

- the warders who naturally create relationships of authority but who are also there to hear complaints, to answer questions and to ensure internal security. They are the only group of people who spend six hours a day on the same floor in contact with the prisoners ;
- social and medical personnel ;
- the assistants on each floor. These are prisoners who, in exchange for a payment, serve the meals, and help out those prisoners who are confined to their cells ;
- the external participants – chaplains, youth workers, prison visitors – who in their own way bring in some light from the outside world ;
- the lawyers. They are important since they represent hope.

### *Groups*

Next, as my colleague mentioned, groups of prisoners can be brought together by :

- affinity, ethnic group, nationality or geographical region ;
- political, ideological or religious movements ;
- criminal classification – robbers, financiers, and other categories of prisoners try to group themselves together ;
- intellectual or cultural level ;
- the same age bracket, and so on.

These groups have positive effects. They encourage bonds of solidarity and bilateral exchanges, help to relieve anxiety for people who are bundles of nerves, and provide healthy competition. In short, they provide as many factors as necessary to give or to give back self-confidence.

However, on the other hand, they also encourage trafficking, gangs, imitation, selfishness, intolerance, fundamentalism and the loss of self-control. Some people will do anything in order to be part of a group.

**A female warder :** Having said that, as man is tribal, and out of concern to reproduce this community life, the authorities often make a deliberate choice to produce ethnic groups : there is the North African block, the African block, the Europeans, and so on. This also enables the hierarchical order of power of the longest serving prisoners over the newest ones to be preserved, and to help the integration of new inmates.

### **A former prisoner talks**

**A former prisoner :** I can only talk about what I experienced in prison. I do not want to generalise out of respect for other prisoners who, wherever they may be, are in different situations which are probably worse.

Having spent 48 hours in police custody on charges of financial misdealing, I was immediately transferred to prison where I stayed eleven months. From the moment I arrived, after meeting those in charge, as well as doctors and psychologists working in the prison, I was assigned to a block where there were other prisoners held for fraudulent company dealings, money laundering and other such offences. There were also some ponces, robbers, drug dealers, petty and big-time criminals. Some prisoners were awaiting sentence : one of them had been waiting four and a half years, for a double murder. We were all mixed in together.

I found myself in a cell with two gang leaders, one from the Corsican Mafia and the other from the Marseilles Mafia. As a result, I had everything I needed. Our cell which had recently been repainted and refurbished was fitted out with chairs whereas three-quarters of the other prisoners only had stools. I had a favourable experience initially, but with time I began to understand what prison was really all about.

### *Suicides*

On my floor alone, nine prisoners committed suicide in the space of eleven months. Most of them were paedophiles. These suicides could have been avoided. They all took place at times when there were no warders present. During the day, there are in principle two warders permanently on duty on each floor ; at night, there are only three patrols. When a football match is being televised, the warders on duty tend to be watching television and so doors being kicked or yells from windows to alert them to the fact that a suicide is being attempted can be confused with the usual demonstrations of prisoners each time there is a goal scored.

### *Drugs*

In the lapses of time between patrols, prisoners communicate with each other and drug trafficking particularly of hashish takes place. I have never tried any since it is not my cup of tea but it exists in all prisons and it is a good thing, since simply having a television in the cell is not sufficient to calm down everybody, and drug addicts find that the substitute medicines are ineffective. This is why pot exists and this certainly avoids a number of potential fights. When there are confrontations between prisoners, sometimes it is just surreal : I have seen people get their throats slit in a so-called 'calm' block. You only need to break a tile in order to have a razor blade in your hand.

### *Medical treatment*

Many prisoners go to the infirmary, if only in order to get out of their cells for a short time, and the nurses do what they can. They do not have adequate facilities. In prison, it is better not to be sick ; if you are sick, you are made to feel that you are a nuisance.

### *Having to fend for oneself*

In prison, one has to be a smart cookie, on the lookout, listening to everything and know how to position oneself quickly, in other words, to test the internal temperature, to know who are the big bosses, and those who are very dangerous as well as who is in the gangs. For example, since I wanted to occupy myself in prison, I discovered what there was available.

- You want to do bodybuilding ?

- Yes, I'm interested.

- Write your name on the waiting list then. There will be a place in four months.

I spoke about it to my two cell mates, and the following morning I started the bodybuilding class. The teacher asked me :

- You arrived two days ago and you are already here ? Who are you then ?

The same thing happened with the chess group. In the courtyard, I was told that it was full.

- What's the problem ? my cellmates asked.

... and I joined the chess club.

It is all about gangs : it is organised, it is very hush-hush, and without the intervention of the warders or any of the prison personnel. But how is it possible ? In order to enrol in an activity, one has to write to the head of the block, who considers the request. He uses a check list which tells him who is already taking part in the activity and who is on the waiting list. He can also be conciliatory : he gives the prisoner who runs the gym hall a free hand because that calms people down. Additionally, the gang leaders are influential.

In prison, there is racketeering going on all the time. If the ponces go out for a walk, they have to pay a price, such as a packet of cigarettes per week, in order to be protected. Therefore, the ponce has to get hold of a weekly packet of cigarettes.

### *The work of Father Franck*

Father Franck did a great job. He managed to group together both the Christian community and the others. Whether they were gang leaders, ponces or drug addicts, no-one was ever refused Mass. "*You are in the House of God here*", he said, "*and you are welcome*".

We persuaded him to prolong Mass in order to have a discussion lasting fifteen minutes about the life in prison of those who did not take part in the other chaplaincy activities.

We also made sure that other activities were set up so that the greatest number of people, whether they were Catholic or not, could get away from their cells, and latch on to something, in this case, the chaplaincy. This was also the opportunity for others, such as myself who had been christened, to go a bit further in my faith : I'm no bigot but that helped me a lot.

We all took initiatives, we all had objectives. My mission in the block was to welcome the new inmates and all the people who arrived in the middle of winter and had been thrown into prison in shirtsleeves. It was freezing in the courtyard and they were asking for someone to lend them a coat, give them a cigarette or a coffee. 90 % of the prisoners I met did not have any money. And yet in prison one needs at least 150 Euros a month, if only to pay for cigarettes and television (8 Euros per week), without mentioning buying other products suggested by the prison administration to improve everyday life, products which are unfortunately much more expensive than in big supermarkets.

The problem is that we are under surveillance by our judges : having been convicted for a financial matter, if I were to talk to a prisoner who had a record of 118 bank robberies (who

really needed help), people would start asking questions. Whatever the case, the chaplaincy made great efforts as far as the new inmates were concerned. One could say that we largely took the place of the prison administration. There is a custom in prison ; when one is released, one gives one's clothes to those who stay behind.

*Who controls whom ?*

As Christians, we try to explain to new arrivals how to behave, how to stay calm, how not to make any trouble, because the warders, as a general rule, do their work well. Often there is a friendly atmosphere which can be tolerant on their side. However, to suggest that it is they who manoeuvre us is perhaps a bit much. In fact, I rather think that it is the other way round, apart from the unchanging hours for the walk. For example, it is our families and not the warders who determine the time for prison visits. Timetables for the activities are fixed in advance and there are a lot of other possibilities which are more or less official and more or less negotiable to leave one's cell.

*Worth knowing*

I was ambivalent with regard to prison. I would nevertheless have preferred to have had this experience at the age of twenty rather than forty-five. I would have learned my lesson : I would have organised my life in a different way so as to avoid this imprisonment which deprives the individual of all outside contact and makes one sleep very badly.

What I have said may be of interest because if one thinks that one has learnt everything there is to know at school, prison is another matter ! Just imagine that since I did not want to reply to the judicial police officers who came to search my home, I asked to be heard by a judge. Since he did not fully understand everything I told him, the judge sent me to prison. I am married, I have children, I am forty-five years old and for this reason I was imprisoned and could no longer communicate with anyone. Isn't there something appalling in all that ?

### **Training for rehabilitation**

**A psychologist :** I have been working in various prison establishments since 1993 and I currently work for a branch dealing with drug addiction which is attached to a hospital and which operates in prison. The prisoners whom we follow when we conduct interviews are drug-users and are sometimes arrested for this reason. Since it is impossible to predict the time necessary for psychotherapy or for psychoanalysis, and since the psychologists and psychoanalysts who work in prisons are not allowed to continue working with a former prisoner, there is no question about starting such therapies during the detention period. Therefore, once a prisoner arrives, we start thinking about his release and we try at the same time to determine the prospects for rehabilitation. Therapeutic mediation groups have been set up. There is a "philosophical stories and oral tradition" workshop and other workshops for literary expression, dramatic expression and written expression. For example, one prisoner started to write the story of his life which was very important to him. Since this is a population which deals with drugs, we concentrate on the body, the awareness of one's body, space, the imaginary. Following this, we talk about feelings, involving some playful exercises.

Our purpose is to help people become aware of their acts by these various methods, which allow them to improve the way they express themselves in our meetings. Having been in these workshops, some people take up studies which they had completely abandoned and others are no longer hesitant in joining rehabilitation groups.

### **A very strange world**

**A sociologist :** I was able to enter a prison to observe the work of the warder. Since I was forbidden to interview people, I had to work in the field with them, but with certain constraints. I was not able to move freely, I did not have a key and I mixed exclusively with the warders. These constraints necessarily had consequences : if I got close to the prisoners, I



was seen as a mole ; if I got close to the management, I was a traitor. Therefore, I had entered into a world of surveillance, and was surveyed by the warders. It was unusual.

Let me talk about power. Prison is often like an architectural model with a tower from which one can survey the whole structure. The places add to certain types of power, of attitudes and of people with an attitude problem. There are all sorts of problems concerning the transparency. The aim is to see everything, at all times, and to be able to react quickly to certain signals. Transparency is a form of power.

The prison is a place which does not offer any temporal support. One does not notice the change in seasons since there are no trees. One can tell when it is day or night but the concept of time gets lost.

This dimension is also evident to the warder who, to a certain extent, is also imprisoned.

One can talk about the search for temporal efficiency of work, which is what the warders look for every day, and of the inactivity of the prisoners and their scruffy appearance. The warders express it well : “ *The prisoners are very slow, as if they are doing it on purpose. They maintain this nonchalant air. However, we are not fooled. They can become extremely active, they are like that everywhere, in the corridors or the workshops. It is as if the place, our place of work, belonged just to them. It’s exhausting.* ” There is, therefore, a permanent conflict between the two attitudes with regard to time.

## DISCUSSION

### A detail

**Question :** *In the talk, the term “Christian” was often used. Are Protestants and other Orthodox religions also included in this title ?*

**Franck Chaigneau :** I should have used the term “Catholic”, because in fact there is a chaplaincy for each of the religions recognised by the French State, in other words, the Catholic religion, Judaism, Islam, the Orthodox religion and Protestantism.

### Reactions

**The female warder :** One must not forget that the first rule is to keep people who are convicted in prison, and to make sure that they complete their sentence, without escaping or committing suicide. That is what safety is about. It is not at all surprising that prison is a closed place. Having said that, it is true that the prisoner is directed by the warder, and that he does not always choose his timetable. This goes a long way to explain his nonchalance.

**The former prisoner :** Imagine people who are constantly locked up with nothing to do: they go mad, and are sometimes driven to despair. One has to understand them.

**The female warder :** It seems that this was not your case, since you said that prison did not have an effect on you one way or the other. But you were one of the group of those who were well-off, and this is probably the reason why you did not suffer too much from life in prison. This, however, is not the case for most of the prisoners. In prison the normal problems of society become concentrated, with inmates who have many problems. I worked in a major female prison. These women were not bank robbers. They were serving long sentences because some of them had been tormented and battered by their husbands, until one day, it just got too much and they cracked. They committed a crime and found themselves in prison for twenty years ! They are in a way victims of their own lives. One cannot say that prison is purely a place through which one passes !

## Penal establishments

**Q. :** *What is the difference between the maison d'arrêt and the other forms of penal establishments ?*

**The female warder :** The *Maisons d'arrêt* are for people who have been sentenced to less than five years and the major prisons for sentences greater than five years, in other words, anything from five years to life. In major prisons, cell doors are open all day long, and prisoners can move about freely from one cell to another.

In theory, the *maison d'arrêt* is reserved for prisoners who are awaiting sentence, or who have been sentenced to a maximum of one year, with cell confinement and locked doors.

From the moment that a prisoner is sentenced, work can start on the projects of completion of sentence, and rehabilitation and return to the community. The *maison d'arrêt* does not always offer the same possibilities.

**The former prisoner :** One should point out that in the *maison d'arrêt*, the "division" is aimed at people who probably have a long sentence to serve. This is different from the blocks which in principle are reserved for the new inmates. First of all, prisoners spend about four to six months in the block to see if they are ready to be alone in a cell : this is seen as a reward. In the block, in general, there are all the people who are awaiting sentence, some of whom have been waiting for several years because of delays in justice, but they are better off than two or three in the same cell.

**The female warder :** This is why in the *maisons d'arrêt*, there are many prisoners who live one day at a time without knowing how long their imprisonment is going to last.

## Female warders

**Q. :** *Is the presence of female warders recent in all-male prisons ?*

**The female warder :** In the beginning, female warders were nuns. Since the male represents authority and power, one may well ask why a woman chooses this job. In the past, the ministry imposed quotas for the recruitment of female warders, but it is not the case now. Many women apply for this job because it does not have a strict image any more. It is indeed forbidden to exert any sort of violence whatsoever towards prisoners unless it is really necessary. It is by talking that any difficulties should be resolved.

Outside of prison one can hardly imagine what it can be like to live in a world where there are only men, or only women. One has to keep a balance so that the relationships are as natural as is possible. When prisoners overstep the limits, I tell them that I am above all a warder and not a woman. Of course, it is not true, because I am what I am. As a woman, I approach difficulties with charm since, as well as the work techniques which we are taught, charm is a really efficient feminine tool. The prisoners also try out their powers of seduction on us to try and get something or other.

**The former prisoner :** If the prisoners are guarded by women, there is no problem. The female warders show their authority more than men but without necessarily abusing it. Having said that, one has to be aware of the fact that if by chance a male warder dared hit a prisoner, it would be like setting fire to the prison. In reality in the establishment where I was, the relationships with the warders, whether male or female, were excellent, with only a few exceptions. We should take our hats off to them, because playing the role of bellboy, nanny, big brother or sister, or psychologist, in front of individuals who are sometimes dangerous animals, takes some doing ! Sometimes we were under the impression that they were in the same mess as us, but we did not want to be in their shoes at any price...

## Roles to be played

**Q. :** *I do not know what to think of all the forms of community activities which have been cited. All these prisoners have more or less broken with society, and they find themselves in a place which one can regard as 'outside the law', with its trafficking, its preferential*

*treatment, and its power struggles. Community life there cannot be based on positive values such as citizenship. It relies on very archaic values as is the case in tribal groups. Does this really bring about progress with regard to violence for violence's sake ?*

**The sociologist :** In prison there are roles to be played. The prison personnel define the role of each prisoner. They give him a position which is not always to his advantage. There is therefore a judgement made within each prison, on the basis of which, one asks the prisoner to play a certain role, beginning with his integration into a group so that things start off calmly. Just before he is due to be released, he will be asked to do something else, namely to detach himself from this group in order to make it clear that his behaviour is correct. At the moment of release he will be yet another sort of person. In fact, the prisoner does not have the opportunity to exploit his real identity. Therefore, there is no question of talking about one's personal history.

Warders are also asked to play a role, notably for the process of rehabilitation. I once observed a female warder who appeared charming, who had to deal with a prisoner who was on hunger strike. In six hours of work, she was only able to devote three minutes to this prisoner in distress, but she considered that she had nevertheless worked towards his rehabilitation. The workload of warders is such that their rehabilitation role cannot be achieved. One can understand that prisoners might benefit from the various attitudes of warders when they realise that the warders have many constraints in their jobs. The language is out of step, each person plays a role.

**The female warder :** Contrary to what was said in the question, prison is not a place 'outside the law'. For example, a prisoner can lodge a complaint following an aggressive action by a fellow prisoner and that does indeed happen. The guilty party can then be subject to immediate disciplinary action, or to a transfer to another establishment, and even possibly a trial in a criminal court.

### **Escaping from the prison environment**

**Q. :** *Religious practice such as was defined is not very different from the concept of citizenship, of respect for others, but also with the added aspect of God.*

**F. C. :** Outside prison, the percentage of men who intend to go to Mass is not even 25 % of the male population. In prison there must be another phenomenon at work...

**The former prisoner :** Among those who go to Mass, how many are true practising Catholics and how many consider that an hour-and-a-half out of the cell is a good deal ? We mustn't let ourselves be taken in : the aim of these prisoners is to spend the longest time possible out of their cells. In addition, when we know that 30 % of them will be released as their cases will be thrown out, it makes one think about the state of mind of those who consider that they are unjustly imprisoned.

**Q. :** *In this 30 % whose cases are dismissed, there are certainly some truly innocent people but there are also people whose cause was well pleaded by their lawyers !*

**The former prisoner :** Before doing anything silly, it is better to put some money aside ! Lawyers are not free, and they can charge high fees, a fact which in itself might lead those whom they defend to fall back into crime, if only to pay their bill... Many prisoners believe that everything is done so that they face huge difficulties when they are released from prison : rehabilitation, psychologists and all the rest, it is not worth anything !

### **What is prison for ?**

**Q. :** *A psychiatrist who had experience in the prison environment said "prison serves principally to protect society against criminals". Generally speaking, there are three sorts of prisoners : robbers, ponces and financiers. The robbers have the longest sentences followed by the ponces and then the financiers. Well, we've got it round the wrong way ! Robbers, at a certain age, no longer commit robberies because they are frightened. One should not put the*

*ponces in prison, firstly because they are persecuted there, and secondly because they are sick people and they will not be looked after properly in prison. As far as the financiers are concerned, for them, prison is a training course to perfect themselves : they leave prison a great deal smarter than before. As far as society is concerned, the answer is clear : one has to keep the robbers in prison until they are frightened, one should not put ponces in prison but look after them, and one should certainly not release the financiers. What do you think of that ?*

**The former prisoner :** Of course I invited some financiers who were believers to the discussion group at the chaplaincy ! Sooner or later, it was time to discuss the major scandals ; we all followed their development, and learnt the lessons. But besides this kind of contact, and some experiences which stand out but which we'd rather not have had, one can say that prison has no purpose.

Of course, robbers who are put into prison do not want to rob any more. Armoured vans are far too well protected ; risking twenty years behind bars for virtually nothing is crazy. As far as I am concerned, I got trapped in a financial set-up, and my conclusion is that in the future I should be a bit more intelligent with regard to my financial activities, in other words, I should carefully avoid contravening the law.

**The male warder :** It's an exaggeration to say that prison has no purpose. It is not just financiers who are in prison. There are some atrocious cases there. It is the only way to neutralise certain individuals to prevent them doing any harm, and therefore to protect society.

**The female warder :** When we talk about the inefficiency of prison, one has to suggest an alternative. Yet in the majority of cases, we have not found a solution other than imprisonment. Therefore, we have to make do with prison and quite simply make it more efficient.

**The psychologist :** All in all, the aim is to deprive people of their freedom. It is true that freedom can be regained following imprisonment, but one also has to consider the cost of an alternative solution.

### **The satisfaction gained by being useful**

**Q. :** *Is it possible to be proud of being a prison warder ?*

**The female warder :** We have heard the account of a former prisoner. He talked about his life in prison. I talked about my work, but they are not the same thing. In current recruitment, it is no longer a prerequisite to be big and strong. It is not a case of bringing big shots or recalcitrants into line : it is a whole different ball game that is played out between prison warders and prisoners.

I will be able to answer your question about being proud to carry out this job in a few years' time, in other words when I will have become convinced that I have been useful to prisoners in the relationship that I will have built up with them through dialogue. It is true that there is a greater likelihood in major prisons of having fruitful exchanges, because there the warder is in almost permanent contact with the prisoners and over a long period of time. It can get to the point when some of them sometimes say to us, with a touch of humour : "*so you've got life too !*"

Presentation of the speaker :

Franck Chaigneau : In the same spirit as other so-called 'worker priests', he worked in several companies and founded The *Table de Cana* in 1985. This is a catering company which facilitates social rehabilitation. He ran a network of 13 such structures until 2001. He then retired and became prison chaplain.

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