

## WITHIN THE WALLS

### A Personal View

SIR LEO PAGE

I AM sometimes asked by kindly people who have been moved by some story of prison life if they might be able to do useful work as prison visitors. (Lest there be some amongst those who read this article ignorant of that term, let me explain that the duty of a visitor is to enter prisons, to sit with prisoners in their cells, and to act—unofficially and unpaid—as a friend and good influence in their lives.) Very occasionally I encourage someone to undertake it. I have great appreciation of the value of the work itself and considerable admiration of those who do it well. But it calls very definitely for something more than a kind heart or religious fervour. I am afraid that I have disedified more than one correspondent by insisting that something more is needed than even the deepest piety. I do not wish to be misunderstood. I have no doubt at all that true religion is the best foundation for work in prisons, or indeed for any other social work. All I mean is that a fine building needs something more than substantial foundations. And even the best foundations remain buried and out of sight. We do not need to keep uncovering and examining them in order to maintain the building in good repair.

I do not remember ever to have heard a prison Governor say that he had all the prison visitors he would like to have. Often have I been told by a Governor that he would be glad to have several more visitors if he could find men of the right type. Plenty of men will offer themselves for the work and after a very few weeks begin to be irregular in their visits, and finally, after six months or so, when they have come to see that social work inside a prison is hard, exacting and saddening (and not at all exciting or glamorous), give it up altogether. Such men are a mere nuisance. But the work, when well done, is of such high value and is so completely suitable for Catholic laymen who have the right qualities, that I welcome the chance of saying something about it.

Not every prisoner is allotted a visitor by a prison Governor. In the first place, many prisoners do not want to see one, and a

visitor forced upon a man against his wishes would obviously be useless. In the second place, many prisoners could not benefit; for example, men serving very short sentences. In practice each visitor has half a dozen or so prisoners given over to him, and he undertakes to pay each of them at least one short visit every week or ten days. The normal routine is that a visitor spends a couple of hours in the prison, and sees each man on his list. It is clear that there would be chaos unless the selection of prisoners for visitors were done by the prison authorities. No visitor, therefore, can reasonably himself ask to select the prisoners he visits, or to stipulate, for example, that he has only Catholics allotted to him. He must do the best he can with each man whom the prison system gives him the opportunity to help; if he is not prepared to do this, but wishes to concentrate solely upon men who to him would be particularly interesting, he had best give up all idea of visiting. He will never be any good at it.

It will perhaps be helpful to go, in imagination, into a prison to see the sort of men one actually finds there. It is no more possible, of course, to describe adequately in a few sentences the sort of men one finds in a prison than it would be to describe the sort of men one finds in a railway station, or at the seaside. There are all sorts, or, at any rate, very many sorts. Some criminal types are unlikely to be found in a local prison of the class we are just entering, in imagination, together. The psychopath, the confirmed recidivist, the professional man of the lawyer or the doctor class, for example, are commonly sent to specialist prisons. But there is a wide diversity even amongst those who serve their sentences, very rarely longer than eighteen months or two years, in a local prison. Moreover, such a prison may be a small one, with no more than a couple of hundred inmates, or it may be a vast set of buildings with a thousand prisoners. About half of a prison's population will be made up of petty offenders, such as tramps, drunk-and-disorderlies, and others with sentences too short, as I have said, to make it worth while to allot them to a visitor. Of the remainder, the great majority will be sentenced for some form of dishonesty. Take, for instance, these three 'star' men whom we see walking there together, as we go inside the prison yard: 'stars' are first offenders, who enjoy certain small privileges, and none of these three is much much than a boy. The young fellow on the left of the three was a clerk in a city office: he is beginning

a six-months' sentence for embezzlement. He was sentenced by a London metropolitan magistrate who was most loath to send him to prison, but he had taken money half a dozen times, and crimes of theft are become dreadfully common, and must be stopped. I had a talk with this lad and he described how he came to steal. He had been betting and, of course, got into debt. So he took a little money belonging to his employer, intending to put it back when a particularly good thing he had been told about by a racing friend had won at Hurst Park. When he got as far in his story as this, he became ashamed and stopped, so I finished his story for him. 'Unhappily', I said, 'the good thing finished down the course, and you were worse off than ever. But you heard of another horse which was an even bigger certainty, and you took some more money, saying you would never bet again if only you could once get straight. Unfortunately that did not win either.' As I spoke, he looked at me and said: 'I see, sir, you have already heard my story.' 'My poor chap', I told him, 'I have been hearing it every week for years past.'

At present, this boy is desperately unhappy. He is worrying about his mother and the unhappiness his sentence is causing her. Another great anxiety is his future: what chance has he of employment when he comes out? He is sleeping badly, and cannot settle down. What he urgently needs is someone to whom he can unburden his sorrows: who will, perhaps, visit his mother and comfort her a little. It would be quite useless at this stage to try to talk to him about his soul. In all probability he has not been inside a church for years.

The two other men of this little group were concerned together in the same big fur robbery and each of them has a sentence of twelve months. But though each is in his early twenties, and each was led, at least partly, through a desire for excitement and a craving for adventure into joining a gang of older men who organised the robbery, they differ completely in origin. One was a lorry driver and was recruited by the gang solely for that reason. He comes from a family of whom many have been in trouble, and such education as he has was got at a Home Office Approved School to which he was committed by a juvenile court for persistent petty larceny. The other lad is the only child of a widow and comes from a good home. His father was killed in the war. If this boy had had a father's guidance it is probable

that he would never have found himself in this trouble. Unhappily, he made the wrong friends at the factory where he worked, and drifted into still worse company at the public-house which he began to visit every night. But there are strong influences for good still operating in his mind, and he is still shocked by his trial and sentence. With all possible remission for good conduct in prison he cannot be released in less than eight months, and to a boy entering prison for the first time, that seems to stretch like an eternity ahead. Indeed, both these boys may well be saved from a life of crime, and turned into decent citizens. Certainly, an understanding visitor would be an immense help to both. But if a visitor is to gain their trust and respect (and he will not do very much good with them unless he does), he must use different methods of approach with each of them. What will attract the boy from a decent home may well be almost meaningless to the other.

This middle-aged prisoner walking alone is another man for whom the Governor would like to find a visitor. He is a shop-keeper in a small way of business in a country town, serving fifteen months for indecent assault. His trouble is drink, and a visitor might do a great deal to help him. At the moment he can think of very little else but his wife and family, and of the attitude they may adopt. If he could be assured of their forgiveness, I think he would make a big effort to take a temperance pledge and keep it. Happily, the financial difficulty does not exist in his case, as he could sell his business and buy another one elsewhere. If his wife goes to live with her sister, as she has threatened to do, his life may go to ruin. On the other hand, if she stands by him, he may start a new and happier life in a place where his past is unknown. There is a chance here for a visitor to affect more than one life for the better.

This cheerful-looking man of about fifty is beginning his sixth sentence for false pretences. If you take him on your list, I fear there is not much you will succeed in doing for him. His speciality is selling non-existent household appliances. He calls with an impressive box of samples, offering goods for sale at most attractive prices, and taking a small deposit with each order. That is the last seen by the housewife either of him or of the goods. The sum of money he gets in each house is so small that, as a rule, householders do not trouble to prosecute, and he does fairly

well. He is quite without normal standards of morality, but a likeable person when you know him, and he is always very glad to welcome you when you go to his cell.

Here, last on our list of six, is a most pathetic case. He is a debtor, in prison for non-payment on a maintenance order to his wife. Nothing has ever altered his determined attitude that his wife is a bad woman who does not deserve alimony, and in whose favour the justices ought never to have made an order. Certainly she is now a most vindictive woman, who pursues him with intensive bitterness. The present position is doing no good to the wife, and inflicts harm on the husband. Poor fellow, he, too, badly needs a friend and adviser.

Because life in prison is wholly unnatural, it produces a mentality not only abnormal but to some extent ephemeral. In prison a man has a distorted standard of values because the wants of a prisoner differ from those of a free man. A prison visitor, whose advice has meant a good deal to a prisoner with no other friend, must therefore expect to be quickly forgotten by most men on their discharge. But that does not mean that his work has been wasted. The spiritual needs of prisoners are the direct concern of the chaplains, and every prison has a Catholic priest on its staff. But the work of a good visitor has often lasting influence, even after a man leaves prison. If it were easy work, with success almost assured in every case, it would not have the appeal which it has. It needs patience, sympathy and unselfishness, and that ever-blessed gift, a sense of humour. It calls for no great intellectual powers, nor is money needed: it wants qualities of the heart, not of the head. If success does not come every day, it is the more welcome when it does. And one comes across instances of patient courage in trouble, or of the kindness of one man to another, which can make one wonder if the benefits of visiting are wholly on one side.

#### NOTICE

The next issue of BLACKFRIARS will be a double number (July—August, 2s.) and will include contributions by Christopher Dawson, Professor Hilary Armstrong, Fr Gerald Vann, O.P., and Donald Attwater.