

A Jesuit's 30 Years in Prison Interview¹ with Father Mario Greco SJ Gianfranco Matarazzo SJ

How can you be a friend to a prisoner and furthermore a prisoner accused of association with the Mafia or of paedophilia? How do you feel when you are accused of being “one of them”? How can you engage in friendship when you know there are also victims of these crimes? And is society really interested in reconciliation with offenders in such serious crimes? Is the apostolic community supportive or otherwise in this kind of ministry in prison?

These are some of the questions explored in this interview with Father Mario Greco, chaplain in the Pagliarelli maximum security prison in Palermo. This Jesuit priest has never written a book or even an article and has never up until now been interviewed on these issues. This is the very first.

It must be explained immediately that Father Greco's experience has brought him into close contact with people expiating sentences for a range of crimes covering every possible part of the spectrum, including theft, drug pushing, prostitution, criminal association, Mafia type association, terrorism, homicide, massacres, sexual crimes and paedophilia. In particular Father Greco has worked for many years with prisoners convicted under the special conditions of Article 41 bis of the Italian Prison Administration Act.²

Father Greco, why this reluctance to share your experiences? Journalists here know you well and when they see you, as you say yourself, they show respect for your silence, assuring you, “No Father Greco, don't worry, we are not going to ask you anything.”

Yes, journalists have learnt to know me and this is the first time I have conceded an interview. I have always refused because I constantly adopt the criterion of a personal relationship with the poor in general, and in this case prisoners. To speak even indirectly on delicate issues regarding the life of a prisoner could affect the relationship of trust I attempt to establish with prisoners. I am making an exception today because I have faith in those expressing the Society of Jesus and this important *Promotio Iustitiae* initiative on such a vital issue as justice has persuaded me.

¹This interview was conducted by Gianfranco Matarazzo SJ, Social Apostolate delegate for the Italian Province

²The expression “Art. 41 bis”, although technically referring to Italian law no 254 of 26 June 1975 (part of the Italian Prison Administration Act), is used mainly to indicate the especially restrictive prison conditions designed for perpetrators of serious crimes and particularly organised crime. Security measures for such prisoners have been intensified in order to prevent contact with the criminal organisation the prisoner belongs to, imposing restrictions on the manner in which visits are carried out and the total number allowed, censoring correspondence and limiting time spent outdoors.

How did your long journey in prison commence? How did the *missio* received from your Superiors develop?

This is my thirtieth year working in prison, I began in 1980. I did not come to undertake my ministry in prison on the basis of a *missio* nor did the *missio* come explicitly from my Superiors, but from life's own unfolding. I arrived in prison because I was living and working in a poor district in Palermo. This was the *missio* I received – pastoral work in a poor and disadvantaged context. I chose to accompany the many people I knew and who were friends of mine. Travelling the same path as them, I found myself in prison. My going to prison was just continuing to share the same road as the poor. For a certain length of time, I accompanied these people in their everyday life in the district. When I could no longer find them, I asked for them and sought them out when they disappeared. To my great regret, but not surprise, I found them in prison.

How did this way of proceeding dictated initially by mere acquaintance with these people evolve? Why did you not just visit them regularly, which would still have meant great attention to the prisoners?

As I was saying, I wanted to meet the people I knew. Therefore I went to prison as their friend. After this first contact, I began my visits to prisoners as a volunteer, to accompany them in that environment not just on occasional irregular visits. Later, my Superiors saw what I was doing and confirmed my work with the *missio*. Thus in accompanying my friends from the district I ended up in prison. The prisoners saw me arrive as a friend and this role was recognised by others I had not known previously and met for the first time in prison.

In the light of your own formation and experience, how did you perceive your commitment and how did this commitment evolve over time?

At the beginning, even with the best of intentions, I perceived my social commitment in prison essentially as material support. Then right there in the criminal world, I understood that the real problem is not material – the evangelical image of the cup of water (Mk 9:41) reveals in the last analysis an interpersonal relationship and a dialogue undertaken because the problem is a man's heart.

What did the move from a working class district in transformation to a distinct place like prison, and especially the maximum security Pagliarelli, mean to you? What does going to prison mean?

I have two specific comments in response to your question. The first is that as time has gone by I have realised I did not go to prison, I am in prison. These 30 years of experience have shown me that. The second point is that prison is part of the city and of society itself. It is one of the tips of the iceberg in society.

Furthermore in our globalised world it is clear that prison is part of the world. In the Pagliarelli in Palermo where I work 87 nationalities are represented! When I began my ministry immigrants were few and far between. Almost all the prisoners were local and, here in Sicily, mainly members of local organised criminal associations.³ Immigrants who become entangled in crime are generally involved in common crime.

When you began your experience in prison, what type of organisation and management model did you find? How did you relate to this? What sort of service were you able to propose?

Today as in the past prison is experienced essentially as a punishment. A realisation which has come to me with experience is that punishment is not only the loss of personal freedom, but is compounded by suffering caused by bureaucracy and the scant human and Christian preparation of prison staff. This is how prison becomes a school of further violence and harshness. The re-educative aims a prison should have risk being overlooked. It is very probable that suffering leads to greater aggressiveness and criminality although there can be a chance to reflect and mature. However the latter can only happen if there are opportunities to meet a friend, say a chaplain, volunteer, teacher, people perceived as friends, who do not judge or condemn perpetrators further, who do not betray them. From this short list it is plain to see these kind of people are not part of normal prison structures!

How can you be a friend to a prisoner and especially one accused of serious crimes?

Above all evil is not found solely in prison. Violence is in the heart of all men. Besides in prison not everyone is evil. There is a significant number of innocent people forced to endure custody and others faced with interminably long legal proceedings. In this context, I am present and act as a friend, without proclaiming the fact. I am aware that all of us need to free our conscience from fetters, weaknesses and sin. He steals. I could do that too and maybe I do already. Those who suffer recognise the motivations of those who try to show solidarity. They also realise when someone tries to help as a brother does, not for show, but because they are genuinely one of them, a true friend. There is no criminal, assassin or offender who does not understand the meaning of this friendship, this sharing, this acceptance, this solidarity. And from this any kind of miracle can spring. Some are only interested in pointing to the crime. Many prisoners have made good progress but are we interested in these stories? I have learnt what it means to have a heart capable of suffering with those who suffer. In their suffering, they understand this and I have learnt solidarity and sincerity in friendship.

³In current prison administration policies, there is an increasingly geographical mix of inmates. Often they serve their sentences in custody in a completely different region from their own.

In your experience is it possible to integrate punitive justice? How?

Punitive justice is not the only way, there is also re-educative justice and restorative justice. For this to happen we must try to free men from the fetters that lead him to crime. However, is it certain society wants to invest in this direction? The problem is the rules say anyone who makes a mistake must be excluded and marginalised. Therefore even when people finally leave prison they are still excluded and the only door open to them is return to prison entrapped in crime once more. Society, and in part the Christian community, provides some material help, but the capacity for acceptance and the desire for reconciliation is lacking. This shortfall is even more obvious in a Christian context, since this is our *proprium*. For us Christians, the origin of the desire for reconciliation is not solely human, but justice towards God. The problem with restorative justice today is that it is still theoretical, just like re-educative justice, and so it will continue if society in general, and ideally the victims, do not share this aim.

Can you tell us of some encounters you consider emblematic in your ministry? What is their importance in your being a Jesuit?

At one stage in the crack-down on Mafia type organised crime, a man was arrested for serious crimes. About two months after his arrest, he asked to speak to me. We met and the wardens allowed us some privacy despite their presence. In a welcoming way, I greeted the prisoner, "Good morning! How are you? How is it going?" He broke down crying before even sitting down, saying "Father, since I was arrested, this is the first time I have felt like a man again. You are the first person to greet me and ask me how I am". Another time, a young honest immigrant from Eastern Europe, no longer able to tolerate the hardships facing his family and especially his children, tried to steal a car, with dramatic consequences. The owner tried to stop the thief by grabbing onto the car but was knocked down and killed by a car coming in the opposite direction. This caused the prisoner immense torment. We judge the facts, but the facts do not always correspond entirely to the truth. This discrepancy led to enormous suffering for this young man. Now he is trying to help the family of the victim, but they have refused dialogue and offers of help.

What reflection are you proposing by means of these two stories?

From a restorative justice viewpoint, there is, especially in the second case I mentioned, at least a desire for reconciliation, even though the personal process of the victim must be respected. However if perpetrators of crime believe there is someone ready to help and sustain them in this path towards reconciliation, this can be recognised and appreciated, even if not yet by the victim. Despite having no direct contact with the victim, the perpetrator is

aware of the path embarked upon and the presence of mediators. The role of mediation in reconciliation is recognised by the perpetrator. This is an aspect of the mission that calls us close as Jesuits – to be mediators for reconciliation bringing the perpetrator and society to this encounter on the frontier and, if possible, the victim as well. The presbytery can be a source of mediation for reconciliation, an urgent although still difficult service. This is a concrete way of announcing faith through promoting justice and love of enemies and reconciliation between enemies is the heart of Christianity. The candour of this announcement and testimony is the news to be offered, a projection of God's justice.

How can we understand the commitment to restorative justice in a concrete way?

Whoever makes a mistake, even a serious one, is still a man and will always be a man and therefore is capable of rebuilding his life and trying to make amends, if helped. Thus, first I have to accept him and not just continue to exclude him completely. It goes without saying that this way of thinking is not only valid in a prison context – this is the specific place where a man is labelled a “delinquent.” Therefore first you accept the prisoner as a man, although he has made a mistake, in fact because he has made a mistake you welcome him even more as a man, offering him friendship. A helping hand can make him aware and allow him to be born to humanity if he has not yet experienced this birth. At times criminality arises because people have not known loving relationships within their own families, or with others in society, therefore they have not been born to human life. Assessment of responsibility neglects this cause originating in disadvantaged environments where people are neatly deprived of freedom and hope. So the first thing is to accept the prisoner as a person. What he has done I could do too, I could also make a mistake, especially if deprived of freedom and hope. Prisoners can undertake to mend their ways. If they want, they can regenerate their lives but only if they find help, if they are loved, if they find an arm around their shoulder. Without this help, prisoners have no way out. We are back to the issue of the attitude necessary and reconciliation.

What support have you received in your dealings with Jesuit institutions?

I have not received much support from Society institutions. Incomprehension I myself have experienced with fellow Jesuits reveal there is not much experience or awareness of these issues, and not many of us have proposed paths of reconciliation. My actions have been challenged, often by fellow Jesuits. Seeing the fruit of my work, I am not too disturbed by criticism. The opposition I have experienced are on two counts. The first that I assert unjustifiable complexity regarding prison (the reasoning being that prisoners

have made mistakes and must pay for their errors) and the second that my approach would send every offender to heaven.

How do you interpret the GC 35 call for reconciliation and building bridges?

The General Congregations have been of great support to me. I do not relate to the decrees as simply theoretical since they originate in the experience of the Society itself and this comforts me, even though there is still a long road ahead. In particular, GC35 provides hope and comfort in terms of the community dimension, to ensure this work is carried forward not only by a handful of individuals. One of the hardest aspects of this job is the solitude, as I explained earlier. In my experience the apostolic community needs to be stronger and GC35 encourages this.

In your work, you tend to meet the perpetrators and not the victims of crime. Where do you situate the victim in this discussion on reconciliation?

I am convinced mediation should be available for victims too and priorities must be respected. Victims must be accompanied, since too often they are abandoned and disregarded, like prisoners, paradoxically. The initial phase of huge attention to victims unfortunately does not last over time and the wounds remain, well beyond the original media furore. Where are the widows interviewed in the past now? Does anyone care about them? Who accompanies the children of victims? Is the State doing anything? Victims experience further solitude this way. Mediation work requires a difficult position, on the frontier, close to both the victims and the perpetrators of crime. This is the real challenge and attending to one group or the other in isolation will not resolve the hurt.

You also worked for some time in the juvenile Palermo prison “Malaspina”. What are the differences between juvenile and adult prison?

There is one essential difference between juvenile and adult prison. While the social mix in adult prison tends to be varied, most juvenile offenders are from the poorest levels of society and almost always have relatives already serving time. There are practically no middle or upper class youths in prison. There is a second aspect which requires reflection and urgent action within the family. It is very significant that, in my experience at least, you do not meet prisoners in reformatories with even very basic schooling.

You mentioned there are 87 nationalities present in Pagliarelli. These different nationalities bring other traditions and religious creeds. What is your experience of this?

In our globalised world, many prisoners are Muslim, Orthodox or followers of other faiths. Attitudes of assistance and solidarity in suffering can be shared with them too. Usually the understanding with other believers is "You are here in the name of Christ and I know you will help me". It is very inspiring for me to be recognised in this way, non Christians too know that Christ has told me to help them.

Paths to reconciliation can cross cultural, social and religious barriers.

This attitude of reconciliation shown towards prisoners in general and especially in such specific cases generates reflection in others and I find myself meeting, personally and at their own request, volunteers, professionals and even prison staff. The inclusive breadth of reconciliation is evident in this simple example, because it goes beyond the immediate prison environment. Reconciliation, as I mentioned before, cannot be limited to the perpetrators alone. As Jesuits we are called to manage these erratic borders. As a chaplain, it may seem I dedicate my time only to prisoners, however, as a reconciliation mediator, I meet the victims as well.

Did you ever have any trouble with a prisoner?

I have never been afraid of a prisoner, but this does not mean I have ever been careless in managing my dealings with them. There has only been one episode where I experienced an attempt to create trouble for me, but I reacted openly and later he apologised. What engenders most fear in me is society, exclusive and hypocritical, refusing to admit any other standpoint and completely distrustful, wondering about me, "Who is he? Is he one of them? What does he want?" In these situations, the prisoners themselves paradoxically have been the ones who showed me solidarity.

You have acquired significant experience too in terms of the world of volunteers circling planet prison - what is your feeling about this? Who are the volunteers you meet in your Apostolate?

There are many different types of volunteers and it is important to be aware of the complexity of the motivations involved. Some people come to help in prison to fill their own solitude. Others are inspired by Christian values or moved by political views. Christian volunteers of all types are the most present.

In the debate on justice and crime policies divisions have arisen regarding the actors involved. In particular, magistrates, in the accepted general consciousness, are people who have attempted to ensure justice is done and in some cases have paid for the efforts made for the State with their lives. What do you think?

Without casting any doubts on the important work they do, they also have different motivations. I would like to point out the complexity of this rationale to those who prefer to see only single-mindedness and linearity. I believe that laws must be applied in a serene judicial environment and this is not an easy task.

What does living in poverty, chastity and obedience mean in prison?

It is a constant reminder of the counsel of the Gospel. In particular poverty is continually recalled by immigrants. I have something, they have nothing. I am reminded of obedience too by the numerous constrictions which are part of daily prison life. As for chastity, one of the major causes of suffering for prisoners is the privation or limitation of affection. It is hard to witness the difficulties experiencing affectivity facing poor prisoners, especially immigrants, whose families cannot afford the long journeys on visiting days when they are imprisoned far away or their relatives are also in custody. The last man I spoke to was a Moroccan immigrant from Milan now in prison in Palermo. How can his wife come all the way to see him in Palermo? For now I have procured him some postage stamps. Prisoners by convention do not speak of this deprivation of affection nor of their personal or romantic feelings since it embarrasses them and weakens their image as criminals.

Gianfranco Matarazzo SJ
Ragusa
Italy