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Prison Chaplaincy: Restorative Personality Therapy

Empirical Social Engagement within the Hungarian Prison Context

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Abstract

Pastoral care is an integrative discipline that requires applying multiple perspectives and frameworks to real situations. In the prison context, complex circumstances demand complex responses, combining theology and the human sciences to address both structural evil and individual guilt. Pastoral care involves inherent tensions, as practitioners must integrate diverse approaches within their professional identity. Prison chaplains must continually cultivate and defend this identity while working alongside educators, psychologists, and officers, explaining their role in accessible terms. A social-scientific background helps justify how pastoral conversation supports penal aims. The work's distinctiveness lies in its grounding in faith and theological reflection, offering confidential accompaniment and counselling to inmates.

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1. Prisonology and Prison Chaplaincy Framed by the Gratia Dei

> “Reverend, remember this for life: the penal system operates in a hazardous mode. One thing is certain for everyone here—the inmates, the officers, the staff, and you as well: one may enter, but there is no guarantee of leaving. We all remain half a foot inside the prison, even though we are not convicts.

This sobering truth, constantly alerting one to responsibility, was impressed upon me by my first prison governor-general at Pálhalma[1]. Another superior, shaping my ecclesial and chaplaincy outlook to prison realities, formulated a prisonological axiom as follows: “It is well as long as we occupy the prisoners, and not they us.”

Those who “occupy the prisoners” include not only guards, educators, psychologists, and members of the correctional staff, but also prison chaplains and practitioners of prison pastoral care. In response, I quoted the wisdom of the Dresden-born German satirist Erich Kästner: *“Das Leben ist immer lebensgefährlich”*—life is always life-threatening. Over the years, I came to recognise and acknowledge these hard experiential truths of the prison world as profoundly valid.

During my years of chaplaincy, however, another dimension of reality also became apparent: what I describe in the title as *a framework of grace.* Within Christian prison theology and interpretation—what I term, in my own vocabulary, the prisonological–prison-ethical synthesis—this has become the fixed point and cardinal truth of inmate care and the safeguarding of human dignity. It is the constitutive foundation, the *sine qua non*, of chaplaincy to prisoners for two millennia. In this framework is encapsulated the surplus of

[1] Translation from Hungarian into English and revision by Ignace Haaz, based on a first automatic translation by Chat GPT5, Jan. 2026.

existential energy that enables survival within prison life: the framing reality of divine grace.

The fundamental thesis—accepted by Christians and denied by others for various reasons—remains this: *"Without me you can do nothing"* (John 15:5).

From their inception, institutions of punishment and correction have been governed by two foundational convictions, rooted in prison philosophy and the philosophy of criminal law. One is the *principle of punishment*, the execution of judicial retribution for legal transgressions, extending at its extreme to the raw exercise of state-sanctioned hatred: "Do not merely guard the offender—hate him as well." The other is the *principle of grace*: preservation, reintegration into the community, moral education, human improvement—embodied in social reintegration and restorative justice, realised through restorative personality therapy within institutional punishment.

From the earliest stages of European penal practice—and increasingly with the spread of Christianity, from the prisons of the catacombs and amphitheatres onwards—the implementation of this gracious paradigm has been a persistent aspiration, standing in sharp contrast to punitive models that humiliate, discriminate, isolate, and deconstruct human dignity through calculated cruelty.

Within the Christian understanding of the human person and the practice of faith, the recognition and confession of sin, reconciliation, forgiveness, repentance, and renewal of life represent concrete, qualitative transformations of subjective existence. These realities testify to the operative power of grace and long predate the restorative paradigms that emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Biblical—particularly Jesuological—anthropology historically established the conceptual and vocational foundations of prisoner care and prison chaplaincy. I am convinced that prison chaplaincy can only be properly understood and legitimately practised if its scope is extended—still often only

in theory—beyond individual inmate care to encompass the pastoral care of the entire institution and prison world as a whole.

There are already examples of this broader approach: evangelisation and mission among custodial staff, the organisation of ecclesial gatherings and spiritual formation for personnel, and in some prisons—particularly in Latin America and elsewhere—the practice of collective prayer and corporate spiritual community. In such contexts, statistically demonstrable outcomes include higher work efficiency, improved institutional ethos, enhanced internal quality, and greater inmate satisfaction.

I emphasise these points in this spiritual prologue to clarify that the internal atmosphere and moral quality of prisons are closely linked to how prison leadership conceptualises the purpose, mode, and qualitative aims of punishment, and how these aims are translated into everyday practice. In Hungary, thanks largely to the coordinated cooperation of educators, psychologists, probation officers, and prison chaplaincy services operating among adult and juvenile inmates alike, a reintegrative, community-oriented, and personality-restorative approach has taken root.

This development has drawn me, along with many chaplain colleagues, closer to the Scriptural practice of our ancient vocation, whose universal experiential truth was articulated by the Reformed theologian Jürgen Moltmann, first in *Theology of Hope* five decades ago and later, a decade ago, in *Ethics of Hope*, making it widely known across the world.

2. Prison as a Contemporary Locus of Divine Encounter

Recognising, acknowledging, and seeking to understand this more deeply, I carried out all my ministry within the Hungarian penitentiary system as the place assigned to me: the three units of Dunaújváros–Pálhalma—Sándorháza and Bernátkút, with their chapel-equipped cell blocks among male prisoners, and Mélykút among female prisoners. For more than ten years I travelled daily some 120 kilometres between Budaörs and Dunaújváros with the purpose of assisting inmates, wherever the Holy Spirit touched a soul, to

experience an inner liberation prior to actual release, namely the profound encounter with God. I also sought to sustain them in this newly discovered sense of freedom which, under conditions of confinement, the divine dimension and faith in God disclose to prisoners.

I was led to this vocation by the Holy Spirit even before I became a professionally trained and appointed prison pastoral theologian. As one of the editors responsible for the Hungarian Radio's Reformed Church programme *Tebenned biztunk* ("In You We Have Trusted"), I visited Vác Prison to record an interview with the prison chaplain, Mrs Tamás Csuka ("Aunt Margit"), and those entrusted to her care. Among them was an inmate, Lajos B., who spoke on air—accompanied by evangelical hymns played on an electric organ—about his arrest, conversion, and new life, in the presence of his fellow prisoners. I entitled the programme *Free Behind Bars*. When it was broadcast in two parts during Advent 2001, the station's audience figures rose dramatically. I myself was deeply affected by what I perceived as the Spirit's direction and by the effectiveness of God's mission within the prison at Vác.

From then on, I felt a strong desire to serve among prisoners in some penal institution, many of whom awaited only external freedom, the end of their sentence. Others, however, longed even in confinement to experience the freedom of Christ's Spirit, which in the truly Jesus-centred sense (Jehoshua = Liberator) brought them complete human renewal: rebirth, conversion, and a reorientation of life. This was and remains the central gospel of prison existence: to know Jesus personally and, through faith in Him, to live in inner freedom behind bars—or within any form of earthly confinement. Everything articulated in Scripture became, during my years of ministry at Pálhalma, lived and affirmed experience for me.

I am profoundly grateful to God and filled with inner joy for this extraordinary "school of life": the lived harmony of deepened understanding of humanity, of God, and of the self, with its capacity to transform destiny. I am often reminded of one of my most beloved authors, Fyodor M. Dostoevsky, and of his own schooling in life and prison. According to the message of Scripture (Isaiah 38:17), the great suffering and bitterness of Siberian penal servitude ultimately served his good. What a surplus of literary and experiential depth

emerged for him from exile, from years lived and interpreted in the evangelical candlelight of what he perceived as an existence at the "ends of the world", among the humiliated and afflicted. It was within the radiance of this surplus of grace that almost all his great psychological novels were conceived.

Each year Dostoevsky prepared a writing plan in early January. In the year of his death he intended to write a book on Jesus—the fifth Gospel. He would have had much, and above all Someone, to write about. Yet this was not to be. For all that can and should be said for our salvation has already been said by Jesus, the Great Liberator and precious Redeemer, in the four Gospels.

In this text of thanksgiving, I can therefore do no more than attempt, fragmentarily, to articulate the eternal gospel as it is voiced within the Hungarian prison world in the digital age—here at Pálhalma, and undoubtedly in other institutions as well—through the testimonies of lives received into grace. *Soli Deo Gloria*: to God alone be the glory for every inmate who has found liberation and new life, for every member of the prison staff, and for the entire Hungarian prison system, which today and in the future is encompassed—and, according to our prayers, ever more fully permeated—by invisible yet efficacious grace.

3. "Jesus, Your Name Is Wondrous…"

With Him—before prison, in prison, and after prison—forever. I welcomed with joy the commendable decision of the Hungarian Reformed Church Aid to publish a volume marking the thirty-fifth anniversary of constitutionally guaranteed freedom of religion in Hungary, within whose framework the Prison Chaplaincy Service was established twenty-five years ago and has since enriched many lives. I subsequently learned that, on the occasion of this significant anniversary, the National Prison Administration also intends to publish a commemorative volume. It is to this collection that I have offered the present contribution.

Between 2002 and 2012 I served as a full-time prison chaplain and qualified Reformed prison pastoral theologian within the Pálhalma "prison complex"

of Dunaújváros, participating in the lawful and purpose-driven work of the Prison Chaplaincy Service. Upon reading the invitation of Jonathan Sándor Szénási, Reformed prison chaplain and coordinator, a multitude of thoughts and memories surfaced: the never-grey days of prison life, interwoven with tears, testimonies, conversions, confessions, tensions, prayers, encounters with God, and spiritual joy. These memories encompass only fragments of the countless days spent among inmates, custodial staff, educators, probation officers, teachers, chaplaincy leadership, and prison administration—within the ever-charged rhythms of entry and exit.

I give thanks to God for personal conversations, collegial support in daily ministry at Pálhalma, for ecumenical church and missionary cooperation, and for domestic and international guest ministries. Gratitude is also due for cross-border institutional relationships, such as those with the Austrian prison chaplaincy, for European and global colleagues serving in closed institutions, for the Hungarian Prison Fellowship and the tireless dedication of its founder, the Lutheran pastor Gábor Roszik, and for participation in the quadrennial World Congress of Prison Chaplains in Toronto. I am equally grateful for the years of shared learning with prison governors, national leadership, and fellow chaplains.

As a believer, I was immediately reminded of Moses' exhortation—reduced from forty years to ten, and from desert wandering to a daily 120-kilometre commute between Budaörs and Dunaújváros: *"Remember the whole way that the Lord your God has led you"* (Deut. 8:2). This verse, together with the words that followed—*"testing you to know what was in your heart"*—became a lived affirmation throughout my years of service. I must also acknowledge the formative period spent in Sárospatak, where, under an agreement between the Reformed Theological Academy and the National Prison Administration, I completed postgraduate training in prison pastoral care alongside Protestant clergy from Hungary and the Carpathian Basin.

We arrive here at the essential point: neither service to God nor service to humanity can be faithfully exercised without a heart shaped by faith. Not merely because "one sees clearly only with the heart," but because only through continual self-examination before God—through confession,

conversion, renewal, and sanctification—may anyone dare to stand in God's service. This conviction resonates with the insight articulated by Jürgen Moltmann following his imprisonment in England after the Second World War: *"In the twentieth century, the prison cell became a privileged place of the experience of God."* This applies primarily to inmates, but also—directly or indirectly—to prison chaplains themselves. Indeed, the prison chapel and the chaplain's office became places of unforgettable encounters with God through honest self-scrutiny *coram Deo*.

All this follows Him who is for prisoner and chaplain alike the one sustaining *"way, truth, and life"* (John 14:6). Hence the profound truth of the hymn: *"Jesus, your name is wondrous… you are fairer than all."* In the Calvinist, Reformed spirit of gratitude and praise, the Holy Spirit shaped this confessional affirmation: with Him before prison, in prison, and after prison—forever. This expresses my deepest conviction: *"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever"* (Heb. 13:8), and *"no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ"* (1 Cor. 3:11).

As an eight-year-old, I stood outside Győr Prison, watching bewildered inmates emerge in striped uniforms, unsure of their fate. For me, "before prison" became inseparable from 23 October 1956 and the tragedy of the Hungarian Revolution—more accurately, a war of independence and its devastating aftermath. Many stood bravely and upright, hoping that Western Europe would come to the aid of the Hungarian people.

In the machine-gun fire that soon followed, it was He who covered me with sustaining grace. With Him also when, as an editor for Hungarian Radio's Reformed programme, I stood before the gates of Vác Prison in 1999 to record *Free Behind Bars*. And with Him when I first entered the gates of the three Pálhalma units—Sándorháza, Bernátkút, and Mélykút—which became my prison congregation for ten years.

"With Him in prison" meant His presence in every circumstance, despite walls, fear, and sorrow. I often faced spiritual challenges, moral suffering, and human finitude in chapels and classrooms, during Bible studies, pastoral conversations, group sessions, worship services, language classes, and

preparatory meetings. He was also with us when, at my suggestion, we delivered 3,000 Bibles and 2,500 devotional books to every Hungarian prison—through the joint support of Bishop Loránt Hegedűs, the Calvin Publishing House, and the Hungarian Bible Council.

Gratitude is due likewise for the publication of my volume *Foundations of Faith and Moral Education for Inmates*, made possible through the support of the Pálhalma agricultural unit and Brigadier General János Schmehl. Christ the Liberator also prepared—unexpectedly—the path toward later recognitions for prison ministry.

More than fifteen years have now passed with Him after prison, following my retirement. Yet enduring ties remain through lectures delivered at the National University of Public Service, publications during the Covid period, and continued reflection on prison ministry. I therefore open these recollections with a line from a well-known hymn born of faith lived both inside and outside prison walls:

> "Thanks be for the quiet morning,
> Thanks that night gives way to day;
> Thanks that every hour's burden
> He alone will bear away.

4. Encounters with Jesus the Liberator: Restorative Pastoral Care in Practice

I wish to share several experiences drawn from what might be called personal "spiritual workshop practices." My first entry into the "Pálhalma prison complex" in September 2002—as the institution was described in a 2008 documentary —would have been marked by a swirl of emotions and thoughts, had I not, before setting out, opened my Bible at home and prayed together with my wife, herself a minister, asking the Lord to go before me.

As at several earlier crossroads in my life, the words of Isaiah spoke with particular force: *"Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my*

victorious right hand" (Isa. 41:10). This verse became—and remained—one of my principal "entry texts" throughout the years. The personal prayer that responded to it carried me through an acute awareness of risks that seemed, from a rational perspective, almost insurmountable, while preserving within me the humility that guards against superficiality and against human or spiritual *hybris*, by continually recalling my dependence on God.

A later remark by a wise superior confirmed this insight: "Reverend, we are all standing with one foot in prison. The only difference from the inmates is that when we leave each day, we can at least withdraw our foot from confinement for a time." I still reflect on this observation. Even amid occasional critical situations, the penitentiary profession's sober self-description of its work as operating in a "high-risk mode" served as a salutary reminder of responsibility and vigilance, enabling me to carry out my ministry with steadiness of body, heart, and soul. The Christian discipline of scripturally grounded sobriety, sustained by prayer and constant alertness, shaped my sense of responsibility—something for which I remain deeply grateful.

Over the years, a kind of inner process unfolded each time I entered the prison: a situational assessment, an internal recalibration of my pastoral vocation, an "evangelical quality check." Between the security screening at the entrance and the concrete encounters in cell blocks, chapels, and classrooms, an inner resonance would sound—the core feature of a Christian understanding of the human person: the distinction between the deed and the doer. This enduring insight, articulated already by Augustine (354–430), remained decisive: it is easy to despise the wicked because they are wicked; it is an act of grace to love them instead—hating the sin that defiles the person, while valuing the person who is loved. This biblical perspective protected me from judging inmates by their sentences, crimes, psychological distortions, or pedagogical assessments. Every prisoner appeared to me as a God-given opportunity and calling to see them through the grace of Jesus, the true Liberator—His grace that reveals sin, frees from it, renews, and reshapes the human person. Each was a potential child of God, a possible brother or sister, or at least a more fully restored human being.

The potential for conversion lay latent beneath every sermon, Bible study, Scripture reading, and cell-based biblical conversation. In every inmate who showed interest in church activities, I perceived a hidden or sleeping disciple (*discipulus absconditus*) of God, of Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit—an intuition I shared with many fellow chaplains. One may accompany a person as far as Jesus; turning to Him and receiving Him, however, remains an individual act of faith.

Prison chaplaincy and pastoral care unfold in multiple phases within the institutional setting. Attendance at church activities fluctuated. In Sándorháza, the largest unit, the chapel offered ample space and even included an informal seating area suitable for individual conversations and small-group work. On Sundays attendance stabilised at twenty to thirty participants, with similar numbers at weekday Bible studies, group sessions, and preparatory meetings. At Bernátkút, despite a smaller inmate population, participation reached comparable levels, particularly after the construction of a new chapel. At Mélykút, the women's unit, participation was somewhat higher. My consistent experience was that the smaller the unit, the higher both the absolute and relative level of participation in church activities.

Across all three units, participants generally fell into three groups. Approximately one third were genuinely seeking the gospel, Scripture, and spiritual growth. Another third regarded church activities as a form of respite—welcome variation within the monotony of cell life and work. The remaining third consisted of occasional participants: newly admitted inmates searching for orientation, or those responding to personal crises such as bereavement, divorce, or illness; others were simply curious. Sustained spiritual work—serious engagement with Scripture, prayer, and Christian formation—was possible primarily with the first group. They longed for a personal relationship with God, honest self-examination, and the narrow path of repentance and renewal. Often through painful inner struggles, they nevertheless sought to embark upon a path of Christian growth.

With them, it was possible to conduct dialogical individual and small-group sessions, whether thematic or guided directly by biblical texts. These focused initially on processing life histories and offences, fostering self-knowledge

and theological understanding. In freshly experienced conversion narratives, the practical contours of enduring Christian life gradually emerged: the desire to form and strengthen a believing identity. This often connected with scriptural accounts of healing, purification, reorientation of life, and renewed relationships brought about through Christ. As Christian identity deepened, questions arose concerning family and social relationships, reflected in correspondence and in more meaningful prison visits. In this process, Viktor Frankl's logotherapeutic and existential-analytic approach proved particularly effective when integrated with biblical healing narratives.

Among my personal recollections: following the completion of the new chapel at Bernátkút, many inmates began to articulate the "distinctive attraction of holiness" generated by the chapel's clarity, light, and spatial separation. The experience of sacred space awakened a longing for biblical purification and inner order. As external freedom diminished, an inner openness and upward orientation emerged, leading for many to new or renewed experiences of faith. Some voiced their longing through the words of the leper: *"Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean"* (Matt. 8:2). One inmate so internalised the sanctity of the space that he came to regard his own body and life as a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19–20). The seriousness of commitment was evident in cases where theological studies were begun during incarceration.

In Sándorháza, one particularly striking story involved an inmate's discovery of a renewed sacred identity. My wife, who occasionally accompanied me, spoke of her experiences studying in Israel and climbing Mount Horeb. During related biblical study, an inmate remarked that the Hebrew phrases he heard resonated with texts he remembered from his grandmother. For over a year, he studied the Old Testament in both Hungarian and Hebrew. Before his release, he appeared at his farewell service dressed in full Jewish prayer attire, declaring: "I am happy to have found the faith of my ancestors—and Jesus, Yeshua the Liberator, played a decisive role in this."

At Mélykút, although no chapel had yet been built, the women's spiritual sensitivity and emotional depth bore remarkable fruit, particularly in community formation. They prepared textiles for services, formed a choir,

and learned new hymns with impressive dedication. This culminated in an Advent concert held in a city church. The choir's highest moment came in 2011, when we organized there Hungary's first Roma World Day of Prayer —an event marked by poetry, testimony, and song. The celebration, attended by national prison leadership and representatives of state and Roma organisations, became a powerful missionary worship service, deeply moving and Christ-centred.

Also at Mélykút, an unforgettable moment was the visit of Bishop Kálmán Csiha, the Transylvanian Reformed bishop who had survived Romanian political imprisonment. His long-awaited visit left an indelible mark. When he recited verses from an unsent letter to his mother, emotion overwhelmed both inmates and bishop alike. Many later said simply: "It was as if Jesus Himself had been among us." The women responded by singing hymns of praise; Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost seemed to converge in a single, profound spiritual experience during that early spring at Mélykút.

5. Visitation and the Spirituality of the Speaker

According to the Christian tradition, God's history with humanity unfolds as a series of visitations. The festive occasions of the liturgical year—celebrated, owing to large numbers, in the dining halls of all three prison units—functioned as earthly, spatio-temporal analogues of heavenly visitation. On each such occasion, I sought to prepare the inmates to observe these events with dignity, reverence, gratitude, and openness.

A distinctive feature of the spirituality and theology of family and kinship visits lies in the varied forms of pastoral visitation among prisoners: in infirmaries and, in certain cases, in cells. On the basis of ten years of reflected personal experience, I can state that there is no deeper theological justification for the legitimacy and necessity of prison chaplaincy than the *factum est* that human visitation—whether familial or pastoral—far exceeds itself. It is driven by transcendent, transhuman, and translocal motives. Its paradigm is found in the Gospel of Luke: "Because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the dawn from on high will visit us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death" (Luke 1:78–79).

Every chaplaincy visit and act of service in prison is, in the fullest sense, a sign that the rising light, Jesus Christ, by the will of the Father, has visited—and continues to visit—us from on high. In this light, teaching within the prison units emphasised that Advent is a preparatory season of waiting for God and his Son; that Christmas is the joyful fulfilment of the promised visitation—divine, angelic, and incarnate—harmoniously anticipated also by human visitations (shepherds, Magi), analogous to the visits of inmates' family members and loved ones. Christmas thus celebrates the arrival of the Visitor.

Family visits to the visiting room demand great care and sensitivity, both spiritually and organisationally. Around the manger—and likewise in the visiting hall—moments unfold that are doubly significant: first, as sacred, divine visitation, and second, as human, familial encounter. God in Jesus Christ repeatedly visits us, in the closed world of the prison no less than in the closed world of humanity across the centuries. Those who receive such visits well may store within themselves the joy of encounter and a sense of belonging; from a successful visit one may live for a long time. Conversely, a failed or missed visit can have grave psychological and health consequences, as in the case of an inmate who did not attend a family visit; the trauma of the missed encounter proved so severe that only prolonged treatment at the prison hospital in Tököl could partially alleviate his crisis symptoms.

Good Friday confronts us with the terror of missed visitation, exclusion, and the sometimes life-threatening consequences of one-sided human judgement. Easter, psychologically and within salvation history, represents the utterly unexpected visitation—anticipated by none but God and Jesus Christ. The risen Christ on the third day offers powerful encouragement that reversals remain possible even in the history of missed prison visits and encounters. What was lost may yet be restored.

The Feast of the Ascension, both in itself and beyond itself, signals that the unique opportunity of visitation has passed irrevocably: Jesus' earthly visitation has come to an end. It stands as a solemn warning that failure to seize the moment may result in the loss of something for a lifetime—or even

for eternity. Jesus wept over Jerusalem because it failed to recognise the decisive, *kairotic* visitation of salvation that came in him: "If you, even you, had only recognised on this day the things that make for peace! … You did not recognise the time of your visitation" (Luke 19:41–44). These are weighty words. It is painful when family visitation fails to take place within the prison system; it is tragic and destructive in terms of salvation —when, whether as inmates or as those at liberty, we fail to recognise what makes for our peace.

Pentecost represents the visitation that grants an additional, renewed opportunity. Among the sequence of festive visitations and decisive encounters, God grants yet another chance—to prisoners and prison staff alike—within constricted or expanded spaces, in confinement or freedom. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit awakens new spiritual perception both inside and outside prison walls. It is a saving event, through which God's Spirit can fashion new and transformed persons. The truly Pentecostal person—Paul, wholly renewed through conversion—testifies: "Put off your old self… be renewed in the spirit of your minds… put on the new self… Therefore, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbours" (Ephesians 4:22–25).

There were also fraternal visitations that brought shared joy to inmates and chaplains alike: for example, the annually returning elderly Danish pastoral couple serving in the women's unit, with Spirit-given energy, song, and preaching; or the regular group visits by international witnesses, with music and testimony, organised by the Hungarian Evangelical Prison Mission under the leadership of József Szabó. Swiss and Austrian guests likewise visited Pálhalma, reflecting cross-border cooperation with the Austrian Prison Chaplaincy Service. These occasions, with their community-building, self-reflective, faith-deepening, and educational impact, remained luminous memories for inmates, staff, and chaplains alike. I also include the annual ecumenical service meetings—organised with institutional support—bringing together representatives of various missions active across the three prison units. These provided valuable forums for dialogue, clarification of expectations, and mutual understanding between staff and those committed to proclaiming the Gospel.

The reflections presented here under the theme *With Jesus in Prison* are mature contemplations formed *coram Deo*. They are confessions written during my retirement as a prison chaplain—a theologian, public intellectual, and redeemed child of Jesus Christ.

With gratitude, and as the fruit of decades of prayer, attentiveness to Scripture, study, and teaching, I summarise inmate pastoral care—understood as participation in the saving mission of the Triune God—as: 1) prejudice-free and liberating relationship-building; 2) a dialogical process of spiritual and scriptural re-reading of the inmate's life story; 3) assistance in sustaining personal integrity amid the daily realities of imprisonment; 4) Christian support for the prison service in maintaining the quality of its mandated tasks; and 5) the cultivation of sensitivity—through Scripture, prayer, and self-reflection before God—not only in the lives of inmates, but also in the very existence and lawful operation of prison chaplaincy, countering the stereotypical and one-sided judgement of the convicted within church and society.

Over many years, my experiential vocational confession—my pastoral *ars poetica*—has become the insight formulated by the Swiss Reformed practical theologian Emil Thurneysen: pastoral care, in all its forms, is not care *for* the human soul, but care *for the human being as soul*. For we view persons, on the basis of justification, as those whom God addresses in Christ. The decisive act of all genuine pastoral care is the act of faith that recognises God's outstretched hand towards his creatures; in this act, the Church itself is born. In prison and in the so-called free world alike, human beings are not mere numbers, but souls—sometimes bound, sometimes stumbling on destructive paths, yet souls nonetheless. Our greatest dignity and calling as (prison) chaplains is to awaken them to this truth: to the spiritual dimension of their humanity, to their created worth and meaning. To God be the glory, wherever and whenever this comes to pass[2].

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[2] See also in Hungarian: Dr. Békefy Lajos, A problémakezelő, személyiségfejlesztő börtönpasztoráció néhány elvi és gyakorlati kérdése – bv pasztorációs diplomadolgozat, (kézirat) Sárospatak. 2004. - kivonatosan: Börtönügyi Szemle, 23.

6. Problem-Oriented and Personality-Developing Prison Pastoral Care

Selected Theoretical and Practical Issues

"Pastoral care is an integrative discipline and practice." It requires the application of diverse perspectives and interpretative frameworks to concrete situations[3]. Complex circumstances within the prison environment and among inmates can only be addressed adequately through complex and integrative responses. According to A. Rich, theology and the human sciences—considering God and humanity, therapy and consolation or interpretation, at both individual and structural levels, and including psychology and sociology—seek to understand how both "structural evil" and individual guilt may be processed and effectively confronted.

Throughout the history of pastoral care, different aspects have been emphasised and utilised in varying ways. As an integrative discipline, pastoral care is characterised by tensions that belong intrinsically to its task and vocation. These tensions have objective causes: practitioners must simultaneously attend to multiple professional and disciplinary perspectives. Among the personal causes, the foremost is the need to integrate these diverse approaches and models within one's own identity, a process that may itself generate further tensions requiring ongoing reflection and resolution.

Pastoral and chaplaincy identity—particularly that of the prison chaplain—is fundamental to this work. It can never be regarded as completed or settled once and for all; it must be continually sustained, cultivated, and safeguarded

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[3] For an extensive discussion see the doctoral dissertation of the author on prison chaplaincy. Cf. Békefy, Lajos in: Börtönügyi Szemle, Vol. 23, No. 4 (2004), pp. 35–46. This section is an abridged English transcription with authorisation of the published work.

from erosion. Within prison pastoral care—more precisely, pastoral care for inmates—additional considerations arise, some of which are addressed here.

The chaplain operates within a team that includes educators, psychologists, and correctional officers, to whom the meaning and purpose of pastoral service must also be articulated. This requires the ability to present and justify one's work in language accessible to non-theological professionals. In this context, a background in the social sciences is essential, enabling the chaplain to explain why conversations between chaplain and inmate contribute significantly to the effective realisation of the aims of the penal system.

As a pastoral counsellor and prison chaplain, I am present within the system of penal enforcement. Both to myself and to others, I must be able to articulate clearly the distinctive contribution my work makes to the whole. The specificity of this work lies in the fact that pastoral conversation is grounded in, shaped by, and advanced through the tradition and transmission of faith. For this reason, theological reflection is indispensable.

Prison pastoral care deals with individuals who are serving sentences and who require counselling, personal conversation, and confidential pastoral accompaniment *coram Deo*. At the same time, this work must take account of broader social structures and relationships that have shaped—and continue to shape—individual lives, as well as the reality of evil encountered even within this context. Such structures and dynamics become evident when examining the biographies of offenders.

Pastoral care within the penal system is tension-laden, demanding, and highly complex. The individuals with whom chaplains work, and the tradition they represent, are often mutually alien—indeed, not infrequently in stark opposition. The narratives, symbols, conceptual frameworks, and experiences conveyed by pastoral ministry may be profoundly unfamiliar to many inmates. Even its language may be difficult to comprehend. Differences in personal background, life circumstances, and social location further widen the gap. A Swiss pastoral practitioner aptly described this as a "change of zone" — a difference comparable to that between distinct time zones.

The German and Swiss Models in the Hungarian Context

Over the past two decades, significant ecclesial, institutional, and organisational statements have emerged from churches and ecumenical bodies abroad with the aim of defining the theological, organisational, and legal frameworks of prison (inmate) pastoral care. In 1990, the Second International Consultation of Prison Chaplains was held in Bossey, Switzerland, resulting in a collected volume entitled *Prospects and Horizons of Prison Pastoral Care*. While its ecumenical perspectives and experiences will not be discussed in detail here, they are noted for the sake of historical continuity.

Instead, two ecclesial models more directly applicable and temporally closer to the Hungarian context are presented: the German Protestant model of prison pastoral care (1991) and the Swiss Reformed model (2002).

The German Protestant Model

The German model was developed under the leadership of prison chaplain Peter Rassow, commissioned by the Department of Pastoral Care in Prisons of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD). From the extensive body of material produced, two studies are highlighted: one addressing the theological foundations of prison pastoral care, and the other examining the tasks and roles of prison chaplains within prisons, the criminal justice system, and the Church.

The theological foundation proceeds from the Church's mandate to proclaim the good news of God's reign, to make known to all the Gospel of judgement and grace, and God's reconciliation with humanity, expressed in forgiveness of sins and the renewal of love. This mandate applies equally to the world of prisons. Prison pastoral care—more precisely, pastoral care for inmates—identifies the prisoner as both the personal subject and the primary object of care. In a broader sense, prison pastoral care may be understood as the institutional framework encompassing the full range of ministerial activities traditionally exercised by the Church: worship, Bible study, and individual and group pastoral counselling.

Prison chaplains work with persons who are particularly vulnerable. Their ministry requires engagement with diverse interpretations of punishment, the handling of social prejudice, and the maintenance of constructive relationships with prison authorities and staff.

7. Practical Considerations

Pastoral care must be directed towards individuals whose lives are shaped by personal fate and by distinctive—often distorted or damaged—personality structures. They are burdened by judgement and deprivation of liberty and therefore experience their isolation with particular intensity. The development of inmates' personality, self-esteem, and capacities for conflict management and tolerance must often take place under adverse conditions. They long for acceptance and protection, yet simultaneously encounter social rejection and, at times, overt aggression. As a result, their communal relationships are frequently disrupted. Prison conditions and the detrimental effects of prisonisation often manifest in the erosion of personality.

The task of pastoral care is precisely to provide space for the preservation of personal integrity, to encourage self-acceptance, and to invite inmates to seek the rebirth and renewal of their personality in the mercy of God. From the institutional–ecclesial perspective of prison pastoral care, all inner and outer renewal is framed by genuine community. This is realised through individual conversations, worship services, and group activities, which must embody a supportive and enabling communal character.

Prison pastoral care must assist inmates in processing punishment constructively. The theological foundation for a positive engagement with guilt and punishment lies in the conviction that human judgement does not coincide with God's judgement: in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God's surpassing mercy and grace are revealed. A central task of the prison chaplain is therefore to awaken a sense of responsibility and conscience in those convicted, thereby supporting genuine personal transformation.

The Swiss Model

The Swiss model proceeds from the premise that prison pastoral care is classically a shared responsibility of Church and State, a principle recognised in all Swiss cantons. According to constitutional provisions, prison pastoral care must serve the well-being of inmates. Within the prison system, it is regarded as a specialised professional service. As standards within Swiss penal enforcement have become increasingly complex in recent years, the question of ensuring the quality of prison pastoral care required renewed reflection. This led to the formulation of quality indicators for chaplaincy, based on clearly articulated principles concerning values and standards.

Prison pastoral care offers relationships free from prejudice. Grounded in the biblical – Christian understanding of the human person, it can only be realised through non-discriminatory engagement, irrespective of performance, actions, or failure. It affirms the message that God offers salvation, grace, meaningful life, and respect for human worth to all — without distinction.

Prison pastoral care is a dialogical process. Chaplains approach all inmates—regardless of religious conviction or denominational affiliation—with openness, care, and respect. Together with them, they seek the spiritual and existential meaning of their life stories through dialogue. This process aims at a transcendent rereading of one's personal history, described as *relecture spirituelle*.

Pastoral care encourages inmates to confront their own life narratives in their entirety. It seeks to point towards God's loving engagement with humanity, an experience that enables confrontation with one's own guilt, the assumption of responsibility, and the pursuit of reconciliation—where possible—within one's life story. To this end, chaplaincy offers free and trusting spaces for encounter, reflection on the past, consideration of the present, and realistic discernment of future possibilities.

Prison pastoral care also supports inmates in bearing the burdens of daily life during imprisonment through sustained relationships and regular participation in ecclesial and ecumenical activities. At the same time, chaplaincy assists the penal system itself by mitigating the harmful

psychological effects of incarceration and by preparing inmates, through its own means, for life after release. In this sense, prison chaplaincy extends beyond pastoral care alone.

Furthermore, prison chaplaincy contributes to social reintegration by helping inmates process their past and articulate viable and meaningful future perspectives. This work requires cooperation with other institutional services, such as psychologists, educators, and probation officers. Beyond the prison context, chaplaincy may also sensitise churches and society to the realities and challenges faced by those who spend part of their lives in prison, seeking to mediate between public interest and the lived experience of incarceration.

Strategies for Action

The foundational attitude of prison pastoral care is acceptance. This attitude is characterised by attentive listening, emotional openness, empathy, and genuine commitment, while refraining from judgement, conditionality, or moralising. At the same time, chaplaincy must avoid false attitudes that would imply unconditional endorsement of the offender or approval of the crime. Sin must be named and judged, responsibility assumed, motivations clarified, and personal traits requiring correction addressed. Without repentance, honest confession, and transformation, no true renewal can occur.

Following the example of Jesus Christ—who judged sin sharply yet lifted up the sinner and trusted in real change—prison chaplaincy is called not primarily to reform behaviour, but to mediate the evangelical call to conversion, forgiveness, and renewal. This requires a multidimensional strategy in which the Gospel of repentance, reconciliation, and new creation permeates all activities: worship, Bible study, individual counselling, and group work.

Ecclesial Group Work in the Penal System

Community-building under conditions of confinement is of central importance. Ecclesial groups—worshipping communities, Bible study groups, and pastoral small groups—do not replace therapeutic groups led by prison psychologists, yet they often include individuals who are resistant to

formal therapy but nevertheless seek ecclesial community. Such diversity can only be sustained through a chaplaincy ethos of mercy, acceptance, and prejudice-free tolerance, which in turn may counteract inmate hierarchies and stigmatisation.

In this sense, ecclesial group work constitutes a form of counterculture within the penal system, preserving human dignity against dehumanising tendencies. Its aims include acceptance, removal of stigma, strengthening of identity, and the cultivation of realistic self-worth. Through narrative methods, trust, courage to speak, and disciplined participation may gradually be fostered. These processes can reduce suicidal tendencies and offer inmates a space—however temporary—where the stigma of conviction is lifted.

Jesus' own group-oriented ministry exemplifies such an approach: relational, dialogical, narrative, and embodied. His communication was personal, simple, and concrete, using stories and images that brought colour into the grey world of confinement. Drawing on this evangelical model, prison group work seeks to build empathic relationships, facilitate emotional catharsis, confront wrongdoing without humiliation, uncover latent positive resources, articulate realistic future horizons, manage panic and despair, and counteract the damaging effects of prisonisation through spiritual practices and active participation.

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9. Short biography

Official prison chaplaincy began in Hungary twenty-five years ago. I served for ten years as a certified prison chaplain in the three units of the Dunaújváros–Pálhalma prison complex. During this time, I wrote my postgraduate thesis in the special field of prison chaplaincy at the Reformed Theological Academy in Sárospatak and completed a higher education course in penitentiary studies. I authored an educational workbook for inmates, contributed to the establishment and consecration of the Bernátkút Chapel, initiated ecumenical prayer events for Roma and women, and promoted the distribution of Bibles and Christian literature in prisons. I taught as a guest lecturer at national penal training institutions, e.g., at the Department of Corrections of the Faculty of Law Enforcement at the University of Public Service.

My work has been recognised by several national and ecclesial honours, including the Silver Medal for Service to the Penal System (2010), the first Dietrich Bonhoeffer Award in Hungary (2014), and the Knight's Cross of the Hungarian Order of Merit (2023). A selection of my reports, reflections, and diary entries has been published in digital form, offering sober, ethically responsible insight into the psychologically and spiritually demanding world of prison life—a closed yet, in faith, liberating space behind bars.

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