



OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY CARITAS SINGAPORE COMMUNITY COUNCIL

“I’m a repeat offender. I’m trying to build up my life and stand on my own feet. But if I need help, the prison ministry is always there for me.”

– Victor, 62, who has been in and out of jail 10 times for crimes like shoplifting.



“If I fail this time, I not only fail God, I also fail a lot of people who gave of themselves to help me. They’re like messengers sent by God to help me turn around my life.”

– Rodney, 70, a former drug addict and serial offender.

What can we do for ex-offenders?

THE cans of Kingfisher beer and bottles of Jacob’s Creek wine sitting on the supermarket shelves seemed to be calling out to him. He could just grab them and drown his sorrows, like he had done in the past.

After all, he had just been kicked out of his rented room. He felt insecure and exploited, working as a restaurant floor manager for 15 hours a day, six days a week for \$1,100 a month.

But instead of going into the shop, Victor called the person who had been his listening ear for the last five months.

The prison ministry worker at the other end of the line did not tell him what to do. She just asked him to think things through.

“Remember the place you came from, how long you were in there,” she said.

In Victor’s case, the place was Changi Prison and the time served was seven years. Previously an alcoholic, he had been in and out of jail 10 times for crimes like shoplifting.

The reminder was enough to stop him from doing something foolish. If the 62-year-old were caught again, he could face 10 years’ jail or more.

“I’m a repeat offender, I’m trying to build up my life and stand on my own feet,” Victor said during an interview at a neighbourhood coffee shop. “But if I need help, the prison ministry is always there for me.”

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For 35 years, the priests and volunteers with the Roman Catholic Prison Ministry have been helping prisoners and ex-offenders. Inspired by the words in the Gospel of Matthew, “I was in prison and you visited me,” the ministry runs 30 counselling sessions a week for hundreds of inmates.

Catholic Prison Ministry (RCPM) has been there for inmates and ex-offenders. Inspired by the words in the Gospel of Matthew, “I was in prison and you visited me,” the ministry runs 30 counselling sessions a week for hundreds of inmates.

During each session, religious chaplains and lay volunteers from the ministry meet the inmates and talk about their troubles. They also celebrate Mass and arrange for the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, reconciliation and anointing of the sick.

Most of the inmates who come are Catholic, but non-Catholics are also welcome. Attendance is voluntary.

The work does not end when offenders leave prison. Ex-offenders can opt for a volunteer befriender who helps them return to their parish. The RCPM office next to the Church of the Immaculate Heart of Mary also keeps its doors open to ex-offenders

who need help.

Like Victor, many ex-offenders need friends to keep them on the right path.

Rodney, previously a drug addict and serial offender, said that it is the community around him that keeps him out of trouble.

“If I fail this time, I not only fail God, I also fail a lot of people who gave of themselves to help me,” he said. “They’re like messengers sent by God to help me turn around my life.”

But the 70-year-old, tattoo-covered vehicle mechanic has not always found it easy to fit in after his release.

He recalls meeting a friend on the street and asking him out for coffee. When the friend said that he had an appointment, Rodney felt hurt.

“Maybe he really had an appointment,” Rodney said. “But I had that feeling that people are shying away from me. People like us, we have a guilty conscience and tend to take things negatively.”

Even though Victor now has a full-time job and his own HDB flat, he will never forget how the prison ministry reached out to him when he was still serving time.

Nor will he forget being moved to tears by the sight of a Redemptorist priest making his way to meet prisoners.

“Once I saw Father Paul Pang soaking wet after arriving in a storm and walking uphill for 15 minutes to get to the prison cluster,” he says. “I cried because I didn’t think anyone would do such a thing for us.”



ACT

As Christians, we are called to extend the hand of friendship to those who feel left out. The Church teaches us that we human beings are by nature social, and by God’s design, not meant to be alone.

“Rather, the fullness of our human dignity is realised only in relationship with others.” (Salt of the Earth, A Group Study Guide on the Basic Principles of Catholic Social Teachings, by Caritas Singapore.)

Some ex-offenders said they feel lonely when attending Catholic churches and suggested parishes organise more activities to engage them.

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