

Vocation to Prison

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Summary: In jail for civil disobedience she describes in graphic detail the experience of detention—noise, animality, despair, mistreatment, “the ugliness of it all”. She has particular sympathy for the drug addicts and prostitutes. Sees her stay as visiting the prisoner and an opportunity to tell the story of those in jail. Points to the need for faith in small actions and for prayer. (DDLW #726).

Last month while I was in jail, I received a letter from a member of the Grail school of the Lay Apostolate, Mary Alice Duddy, who has been working in Brazil for some years. She wrote:

“A year ago I was in Rio and we visited the Little Sisters of Charles de Foucault in the little hut in the Favella on the Sao Carlos hill. I’ve thought of this so much these days in relation to you, Dorothy. The little hut is overlooking the women’s prison at Rio and there are two Little Sisters voluntarily in the prison, leading the daily life of the women who have been sentenced—just out of love and to remind them of Christ and His love for all of us. I felt such an affinity between the Little Sisters who were ‘free’ with the Blessed Sacrament in the tiny little room of that hut, and those who were imprisoned. So much prayer going out to encourage and sustain the ones who were not free.”

Perhaps in Latin American countries it is possible, with the Catholic background and understanding, to have one’s self committed, but it would not be possible in New York or any American city. However they got there, I was touched to the heart at this letter and felt the influence of that prayer all the way up to the Women’s House of Detention, the seventh floor, corridor A, cell 13, coming from Brazil for prisoners. Never again will I forget to pray for them, because I feel that they are the most abandoned of God’s children. Certainly visiting the prisoner is one of the seven corporal works of mercy, and yet it is made all but impossible even for “the friendly visitors” who are a recognized organization who bring gifts to the prison, but are never able to penetrate its bars and walls on those floors above.

Here there seems to be no room for the spiritual. Physical care is given in the clinic and hospital, there are five doctors in attendance, nurses and nurses aides, etc., and after all the preliminary tests and examinations, x-rays, cardiographs, blood tests, smears, and so on are taken, every day for the duration of one’s stay, the shout “CLINIC” reverberates through the corridors, several times a day, and girls leave their work shops, their cells, to vary the monotony of their days by waiting in line for an aspirin, lotion for heat rash, gargle, eye wash, and various other innocuous remedies and have the refreshment of a visit with inmates from other floors at the same time.

Play is encouraged, bingo, basket ball, interpretive dancing and calisthenics, but sexual play is the most popular and is indulged in openly every evening on the roof when the girls put on rock and roll records. Two in a cell does not help matters, but the authorities deny the overcrowding now since a new ruling was passed permitting ten days off a month for good behaviour on the long term women, so that just before we pacifists came in to serve our thirty day sentence, a great many prisoners were released. Just the same a dozen or a score of cells on our floor held two cots, which made our six by nine rooms more crowded than the tiniest hall bedroom. (I read Kon-Tiki from the prison library while there, and my cell seemed like the raft they lived on as the mariners crossed the Pacific.)

One stout woman who had a cell to herself, was so cramped on the very narrow cot, that she hitched her cot up against the wall by the iron chain put there for that purpose to make cleaning easier, and spread a blanket out on the cement floor and slept there as in a tent.

The four of us who were arrested for violating the civil defense law had cells next to each other, and we were two in a cell, on the most airless corridor, with the darkest cells. We had a 25 watt bulb in ours, Judith Beck and I, until the last week when a tall young Negro climbed on the cot and took out a 50 watt bulb from another cell which had just been vacated. Our cells faced North, and were all but against the old Jefferson Market court. We felt that this was because of the picketing which was going on during the month, and because from the C and D corridors, we would have had better windows and could have looked out. Opposite us were the showers steaming with heat and closets for extra cots and mattresses so there was no cross ventilation. One of the captains said she thought she was putting us in a good corridor, next to each other, and said she thought she was doing us a favor, but it was so obviously the least desirable and most airless and dark corridor, that I do not see how she could honestly think that. Perhaps she did. I do know that every move made from the time one is arrested until the time one leaves a prison, everything seems to be calculated to try to intimidate, and to render uncomfortable and ugly the life of the prisoner.

How entirely opposite the work of the Good Shepherd nuns is, whose Mother Foundress said that her aim was to make the girls happy and comfortable and industrious, and who surrounded her charges with love and devotion and with the expectation of good.

“Here we are treated like animals,” one girl said to me of the House of Detention, “and so why shouldn’t we act like animals.” Perhaps I do not know much about biology, but it seems to me that perversion is not practiced by animals. Nor do animals speak the unutterable filth that punctuates the conversation of prisoners. So in a way these prisoners are pushed below the animal level.

Prisoners only? I mentioned this to someone who was working in a steel mill and he said the language was the same there. A girl who worked in a factory on Canal Street in New York said the language of the women was foul in her place of work, too. The kind old woman who comes each Saturday at one o’clock to the chapel of the jail to instruct the few inmates who show up in how to go to confession tells the girls to counter such obscenity and profanity with the phrase “Blessed be God.” That is good, and I used her reminder over and over again. But it is not enough. When the reaction to one’s work in factory and mill and laundry and kitchen is an expression of hostility towards employer and fellow worker, couched in such terms so unutterably horrible, one can only conclude that the life of the worker today is one of

anguished boredom, frustration, a dissipation of the life forces. It does not need to be so. In a Commonweal article, Fr. De Manasce said once that the reason for the emphasis on sex these days is that man is so thwarted in his work. There is no joy in it, no happiness, no pleasure, no sense of creativity. Generally workers call this life a rat race, to express its bestiality. And they hate the boss for the pressure put upon them. And in their everspreading hatred and bitterness they try to befoul this most sacred love. When they strive to express this in curse and expletive they go all the way back to Oedipus and accuse each other of knowingly committing the crime which he unwittingly committed, and for which he nevertheless endured the voluntary penance of putting out his own eyes. Without the use of four letter words, I can thus describe the constant, daily, hourly language. Shouts, jeers, defiance of guards, jailors, officers (however they wish to be called) and each other, expressed in these ways, reverberate through the cells and corridors at night while one tries to pray, rosary in hand. It is possible too to say the Jesus prayer, "My Lord Jesus Christ, son of the living God, have mercy upon us sinners," that prayer so famous in the east, so popular in Russia. One wonders if anywhere in that land of official atheism, it is still being offered up.

Noise, perhaps that is the greatest torture in jail. It stuns the ear, the mind. It took me a week to recover from it after I came out. The city itself seemed silent. A strong healthy Polish Jewish girl who should have used her great vitality working with a mate on the land and in bearing children instead of dissipating it in prostitution and drugs, held her head in her hands and cried. To her even it was the worst torture,—the noise. Yet she herself was one of the worst offenders. When she started her ribald stories at night, her voice reverberated from cell to cell. "But this place was not made to live in," she complained, pointing to the iron bars, the cement and tiled walls. "The ceilings are low, the sounds bounce around."

Everything sounded exaggeratedly loud,—the television in the "rec" room on each floor blared in the most distorted way. One heard clamor, not words or music. The clanging of gates—seventy gates on a floor, on the four corridors, the pulling of the lever of each corridor which locked all the cells in each corridor, the noise of the three elevators, the banging of pots and pans and dishes from the dining room,—all these sounds made the most unutterable din, aside from the human voice. The guard, one to a floor, has to have strong lungs and throat to be heard, and a compelling presence. Our guard whom we had during our five days in January, as well as this 25 days in July and August, could make herself heard. She looked like a stern school teacher and she seldom smiled and never "fraternized." The women respected her. "She's an honest cop," one of them said of her. "She's just what she is and does not pretend to be anything else." That meant that she did not get friendly with any one of the girls either honestly to help them, or to get over familiar with them. I saw a few of the guards being treated with the greatest effrontery by the prisoners, who did not hesitate to whack them across the behind as they went in and out of the elevator,—who kidded with them as equals, and whose overtures were greeted by the same guards with smiling acceptance. A "good" officer had to know just how far to go in severity too; just how firm to be and just how much to put up with, to overlook. I saw one guard give what we thought was a friendly push to a prisoner, to hasten her exit from the auditorium where the prisoners had just put on a summer show and the prisoner turned on her viciously, threateningly. The officers do not press the point on such an occasion. They realize they are sitting on a volcano. They know when to back down. But there were a number of occasions when I was ashamed for them,

witnessing their humiliation. The hostility of the Negro for the white flares up on such an occasion, and helpless as the prisoner may seem to be, she knows too that she is the superior in numbers, that she can start something if she wants to, and she knows too the worst she has to expect. In many cases the worst has already happened. They have undergone the "cold turkey cure."

When I was invited to speak on Night Beat, in a letter addressed to me in the prison, and of course opened and commented on all over the House of Detention, the prisoners came to me and begged me to tell the world "How we are put here for long terms,—and about the cold turkey cure too. About how we are thrown in the 'tank' and left to lie there in our own vomit and filth, too sick to move, too sick even to get to the open toilet in the cell."

"I know," one girl added, "because I had to clean out those places." These cells are called tanks because they are so bare of furnishings they can be hosed out, I suppose. "The cooler" on the other hand is the punishment cell, and there are numbers of them on various floors. I understand they are cutting down on the number of "coolers" and putting just one on each floor, where a recalcitrant one will be kept in solitary for brief periods, until she "cools off."

I heard various stories of padded cells, of cells with only ventilating systems, no window, no open bars, where a girl sits in the dark; of cells where water can be turned on in some kind of sprinkler system to assist in the process of cooling off. I heard of girls being thrown naked in these cells on the pretence that they might use some article of clothing to make a rope to hang themselves. I heard of girls breaking the crockery bowls, and using the shards to try to cut their throats or their wrists. I heard of girls trying to hang themselves by their belts. But I know none of these things of my own knowledge. I did see, from the open elevator door, as we journeyed to and from clinic or workshops, the gruesome steel plated barred doors of these same punishment cells. Most cells for the 500 or so prisoners, or girls held in "detention," are cemented and tiled half way up the front, and then barred to the ceiling; about ten bars across the front of the cell, perhaps five bars to the gate which is so heavy one can hardly move it. It is the crowning indignity for the officer to shout, "close your gates," and to have to lock oneself in. It is not open enough for air, since the cots are low, but the open bars at the top enable one to call the guard, to call out to other prisoners, to carry on some friendly intercourse. The cooler is meant to be a place of more severe punishment than the cell, of course, so it is completely closed in.

"Tell how we are treated," they cried out to me. I can only tell the things that I have seen with my eyes, heard with my ears. The reports of the other prisoners will not be considered creditable. After all they are prisoners, why should they be believed? People will say, "What,—do you believe self-confessed thieves, prostitutes, drug addicts, criminals who are in jail for assault, for putting out the eyes of others, for stabbings, etc."

It is a little too much to believe perhaps that twenty girls have died there in the house of detention, from the cold turkey cure these last two years, as one inmate charged. But there are those ominous stories which appeared in the New York Times, and in other New York papers too, of a Dr. Mary Foldvary, 62 year old refugee physician in the Women's House of Detention who was arrested on a gold hoarding charge, and whose activities as a doctor were also looked into at the time. Charges were made then that several girls had died in the House of Detention. Nothing has been heard of this case since then but I remembered it when I

heard one young drug addict tell the story of a girl who died in the cell, after her “cellie,” as the room mate is called, had cried over and over again for the officer to come and administer to the sick girl. When the doctor finally came hours later after the cells were unlocked, she was assaulted by two prisoners and her head poked down the open toilet, which one of the prisoners kept flushing in an attempt to drown the doctor. “Her head shook from that time on, as though she had palsy,” one of the other girls said.

Again, I repeat, these are tales I heard told and repeated and they may be legends, but legends always have a kernel of truth.

Ill treatment? How intangible a thing it is sometimes to report. Whenever I was asked by the officers and captains and the warden himself, how I was making out,—how I was being treated, I could only say that everything was alright as far as I was concerned,—that I had no complaint to make. After all, I was only there for twenty-five days, what with the five days off for good behaviour. I had no complaint to make of individuals, and yet one must complain about everything. The atmosphere, the attitude, the ugliness of it all. “After all, we don’t want to make this place glamorous,” the guards said. And how many times when a prisoner was released did I not hear them say, “You’ll be back!” setting a stamp of hopelessness on any attempt made by the prisoner to reform. Listening to the prisoners talk about the kick they got out of drugs, how impossible it was for them to conceive of themselves as “squares,” those who go out to work honestly every day, how hopelessly they regarded the world outside, which they nevertheless longed for hourly, made me feel too, that without a “community” to return to, in the early Christian sense,—it was indeed hopeless.

But in the attempt not to make a place glamorous, there need not be so many small indignities heaped on each prisoner. Why cannot they be treated as they are in the Good Shepherd Homes (where they are sentenced for two years or over) as children of God, and made happy and comfortable. The very deprivation of freedom is punishment enough. The breaking of the habits of vice is difficult enough.

On one occasion in the chapel, the catechist said to Deane, “Just look at that wonderful electric fan! How good they are to you. Such luxury in prison!” She was speaking lightly, of course, but a prisoner resents such lack of understanding.

In the past I had received letters from Catholic Worker readers who had been officers and prison officials which showed the same lack of understanding and I could only think—what if they were crowded into a bullpen, a metal cage, awaiting trial, then transported in a sealed van, with no springs where they are tossed from seat to ceiling in imminent danger of broken bones, bruised spines, then lined up naked, stripped, searched for drugs, prodded rudely and even roughly, dressed in garments inadequate, coming to the knees, scarcely wrapping around one, and then, every last belonging, from rosary to prayer book and Testament, stripped from one, transported almost naked to one’s permanent cell and there locked in behind bars. Contemplating our critics, our chaplains, our catechists under such circumstances, seeing them also shivering nakedly, obeying blindly, pushed hither and yon, I could not help but think that it is only by experiencing such things one can understand, one can have compassion (suffering with) one’s brother. How many priests and nuns around the world have had these experiences in Russia, Germany, Japan, in our generation? In the face of the suffering of our time one is glad to go to prison only to share in some small way these sufferings.

Of course our friends and readers will remind us of the torture, the beatings, the brain washings in the prisons of Russia and Germany. As for the beatings, third degree methods are generally accepted in our own land. I have read of them, heard of them from parole officers as well as from prisoners. In the case of sex offenders, offenses against little children, brutality is repaid with brutality and with a righteous indignation which is wrought up to justify it. One social worker said to Deane about a mother who had burned her child's hand in the fire for some disobedience, that she deserved the same treatment. One of the prisoners who was a drug addict told me that she had been so beaten by members of the narcotic squad to force her to tell where she had gotten her supply of drugs that they were unable to arrest her for fear they themselves would be held criminally liable for her condition. Which goes to show that beating, though accepted in practice, is not accepted in theory. We profess not to believe in such treatment by our law enforcement officers. Such treatment is associated with lynch mobs.

Over a year ago, on the front page of the magazine section of the New York Times there was a long article about the treatment of drug addicts in Great Britain. There they are not criminals, but patients and are so treated through clinics and custodial care. Here they are made into criminals by our methods which make the drug so hard to get that the addict turns to crime to get it. All criminologists believe that we should reform our own thinking in this regard. One prison official at a recent meeting said that nowadays a prison sentence was a life sentence, on the installment plan. And so it is with drug addicts. The one girl who told of the beating she received and other horrifying ill treatment had started to use drugs when she was twelve, and had become a prostitute at that time also. She had been in prison 16 times since then and now she was 22. Another 21 year old released the day after we arrived at the detention house tried to commit suicide within the week of her release, and after a stay in the prison ward at Bellevue was brought back to us and was in the hospital ward at the House of Detention. Prisoners are allowed to have the daily papers sent in to them, so we all read about the case of Maria. She swore she would try it again and again until she succeeded. She could not get work, she said, and she could not get cured. If our judges had hearts of flesh instead of hearts of stone, they would see this as a case for the Good Shepherd nuns or a hospital.

Another girl, Hester, 21 years old, on being arrested twisted the wheel of the car in which the plainclothesman was driving her to the jail and wrecked the car. The driver was killed and she was being held for manslaughter. She said that she was so afraid of the "cold turkey" cure which she had suffered before that she was desperate and did not know what she was doing.

As for the problem of prostitution, most of the girls openly admitted it. "I'm a pross," they told us. "I was money hungry. I wanted a car," or "I wanted drugs." They were much interested in what Judge Murtagh had said at a recent conference on the problem, and they had heard of his book on the subject. They felt the injustice of the women being arrested and not the men, and they despised the tactics of the plainclothesmen who solicited them in order to trap them. The grossest and most horrible misconception held not only by prostitutes but also by some pious people is that were it not for the lowly prostitute there would be far more sex crimes. I heard this statement made by Matilda, one of the girls down the corridor

one evening when she was in a quieter and more philosophical mood. It is an old fashioned notion in a way, since sex relations have become so easy going in these “post war generations.” Anything goes now, in the world, when there is no accepted religious practice, when the commandments are not accepted as the law of God. I have even heard Catholics debating how far one could go, in kissing, for instance—and this at a Catholic Action conference, in a Catholic Center. How many Catholics have any concept of purity as a positive virtue, and relate that purity to marriage relations? We are not a chaste generation. But what Matilda went on to demonstrate was that jaded men in their demands on prostitutes wished to explore every perversion, to the disgust of what society considers the lowest of women, whores and dope fiends. These are not pretty words nor are they pretty thoughts. But everything comes out in the open in jail. “The more I see of men,” one girl said, “the more I’d prefer relations with a woman.” And another pretty little thing added wistfully, “I’ve got to get used to the idea of men, so that I can have a baby. I would love to have a baby.” Some years ago a good Catholic layman on his return from Italy said to me, “Prostitution is accepted in Italy. It is legalized. They regard these things more realistically, and accept it as the lesser of two evils. Even the theologians justify it as preventing greater harm, and in a way protecting good women and children.”

And yet Cardinal Newman wrote once that not even to save the world, or to save good women and little children, could a single venial sin be committed. I spoke of this to Judith Beck, talking of means and ends, and she reminded me of the Tolstoi tales, “The Godfather” and “What Men Live By.” Tolstoi is always, in these short and wonderful stories, reminding us that God sees all, can remedy all, can protect all, and so we can well trust also that if we forego atomic weapons, taking this risk, God will prevent world disaster. It will not be a Communism that will prevail, but we who believe. All things are possible to those who believe. “Lord, I believe, help thou my unbelief.” But I think also of our Lord’s sad words, “When I come again, think you that I will find faith upon earth?”

Certainly when you lie in jail thinking of these things, thinking of war and peace, and the problems of human freedom, jails, drug addictions, prostitutions, and the apathy of great masses of people who believe that nothing can be done, I am all the more confirmed in my faith in the little way, of St. Theresa. We do the minute things that come to hand, we pray our prayers, and beg also for an increase of faith—and God will do the rest.

One of the greatest evils of the day is the sense of futility. What good does it do? What is the sense of this small effort? We can only lay one brick at a time, one foot of pipeline; we can be responsible for only the one action of the present moment. But we can beg for an increase of love in our hearts that will vitalize and transform these actions, and know that God will take them and multiply them, as Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes of the small boy and so fed a multitude.

Next year, perhaps, God willing, we will again go to jail and perhaps too conditions will be the same. To be charitable we can only say that the prison officials do the best they can, according to their understanding. In a public institution they are not paid to love the inmates, they are paid to guard them. They admit that the quarters are totally inadequate, that what was built for a House of Detention for women awaiting trial, is now being used for a workhouse and penitentiary. When the girls asked me to speak for them, to tell the world

outside about “conditions,” they emphasized the crowded and confined surroundings.

“We are here for years, to work out our sentences, not just for detention!” Shut in by walls, bars, concrete and heavy iron screenings so that one’s vision of the sky from the roof is also impeded, one’s eyes suffer from the strain. One’s nerves clamor for change, for open air, more freedom of movement.

Over on Hart’s Island and Riker’s Island the men can get out and play ball, can work on the farm, in the tree nursery. All around is water and boats and seagulls, and the beauty of the sea air coming from the Atlantic. And the women have long been promised North Brother Island, as a companion institution for them. But there are insuperable obstacles, seemingly, in the way. Money of course figures largely. There is money for Civil Defense drills, for death rather than for life, money for all sorts of nonsensical expenditures, but none for these least of God’s children suffering in the midst of millions who scarcely remember they are there. The New York Times in an editorial two years ago referred to the Women’s House of Detention as a Black Hole in an editorial so titled. But nothing is done. “Nothing short of a riot will change things,” the warden told us. Was he perhaps advocating we pacifists start one?

We are told that the kingdom of heaven must be taken by violence, and we must use the same forces in combatting such injustices here. If our readers will pray for the prisoners—if our New York readers, when they pass the Women’s House of Detention will look up, perhaps wave a greeting, say a prayer, there will be the beginning of a change. Two of the women, Tulsa and Thelma, said that they never looked out those bars,—they could not stand it. But most of the other prisoners do, and perhaps they will see you as you look up. Perhaps they will feel the caress of your prayer, and a sad heart will be lightened and a resolution strengthened, and there will be a turning away from evil, and towards the good, and you will have reached that of God which is in every man. Christ is with us today, not only in the blessed Sacrament and where two or three are gathered together in His Name, but also in the poor. And who could be poorer or more destitute in body and soul, than these our companions of the last twenty-five days?

Read Liberation

P.S. I am writing another article on the Civil Defense Demonstration of July 12, about those who took part in it, about our work in prison, and the books we read and the conversions we had, which will appear in the next issue of LIBERATION. Those who wish a copy or a subscription, write to LIBERATION, 110 Christopher Street, New York City.