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The FURROW

A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

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Theology of
Prison Ministry

December 2021

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The Irish poet and playwright Oscar Wilde once said that prison walls are ‘built with bricks of shame’.¹ In ‘The Ballad of Reading Gaol,’² Wilde, who was a prisoner himself for two years, speaks about the pain felt by prisoners, as well as ‘the heart of stone’³ which forms inside them as they shut down inwardly: ‘[T]hough I was a soul in pain, My pain I could not feel.’⁴ This pain can lead to the most pressing problem for prisoners including self-alienation, the capitulation to self-hate, and pervasive feelings of meaninglessness.⁵ Indeed, this is the lived reality for so many people held in prisons today. Prison ministry operates within this very difficult world and my research, from within the German prison system, explores these existential challenges and attempts to find an answer to them. My research developed from my own work, in two German prisons (Justizvollzugsanstalten Fulda and Hünfeld), where I have served as prison chaplain for the Catholic Diocese of Fulda, for six years. In my work I have constantly attempted to maintain a creative tension between academic theory and theological praxis as I work ‘Towards a Theology of Prison Ministry’.⁶

1 Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis: The Ballad of Reading Gaol and Other Writings* (London: Wordsworth Editions, 2020 [1999]), 135. The Irish poet and playwright Wilde was incarcerated from 1895 till 1897.

2 Wilde, *De Profundis*, 117-138.

3 *Ibid.*, 137

4 *Ibid.*, 118.

5 Cf. Dennis W. Pierce, *Prison Ministry: Hope behind the Wall* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013 [2006]), 81.

6 See Meins G.S. Coetsier, *Towards a Theology of Prison Ministry*; Ph.D. Dissertation, Trinity College Dublin, School of Religion, Loyola Institute, 2021 [<http://www.tara.tcd.ie/handle/2262/96469>].

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KARL RAHNER AND 'THE PRISON PASTORATE'

Among Karl Rahner's four thousand books and articles,⁷ there is a relatively small and unnoticed piece that he wrote on 'The Prison Pastorate'.⁸ This short essay, which initially served as a lecture to prison pastors, was eventually published in 1966 in Volume 3 of Rahner's collected works *Mission and Grace*.⁹ In this lecture-meditation, Rahner states that we must 'read the words of Christ, his incredible, provocative, thrilling words'¹⁰ in Matthew 25: 34-40: "Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was in prison, and you came to see me."¹¹

In view of this Scripture passage, Rahner argues that 'in the prisoners entrusted to our pastoral care we find Christ our Lord; and in these prisoners we find ourselves, what we see in them being the concealed truth of our own situation.'¹²

Rahner's theological emphasis on Matthew 25 and his central scriptural meditation provides universal insights for contemporary pastoral care, while simultaneously confronting us with the immanent and concrete limitations of his views on prison ministry. In the contemporary world prison ministry deals increasingly with the existential needs, pain, and suffering in prisoners' lives. My research argues that Karl Rahner's views on prison ministry, although deeply valuable and of significance both in their own right and within the context of his theological writings, are *not* adequate to deal with the more complex needs and demands of prison ministry in the twenty-first century.

A central part of my argument is that significant pastoral aspects of prison ministry have been disregarded by Rahner. This is because 'The Prison Pastorate' does not take the suffering and world-view of prisoners into account. Moreover, Rahner's Christian focus and rather priest-centred approach lacks the kind of creativity, encounter and resources for group work and community building

7 For Texts in the original German see *Karl Rahner Sämtliche Werke*. Herausgeber: Karl-Rahner-Stiftung unter Leitung von Karl Lehmann, Johann Baptist Metz, Albert Raffelt, Herbert Vorgrimler (†) und Andreas R. Batlogg SJ. Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1995-2018.

8 The English quotations [abbreviated MG] from Karl Rahner's writings are taken from: "The prison pastorate," in: *Mission and Grace: Essays in Pastoral Theology*, Volume 3, tr. Cecily Hastings (London and Melbourne: Sheed and Ward, 1966), 74-97.

9 Ibid.

10 *MG*, 3: 77. *SW*, 16: 215. *SG*, 449.

11 Ibid.

12 *MG*, 3: 89. *SW*, 16: 221. *SG*, 457: Wir finden in den Gefangenen uns selbst, indem wir in ihnen unsere eigene verborgene Situation erblicken.

which is needed in the secular prison populations of today.¹³ Consequently, I am convinced that a more contemporary approach to prison ministry, and one which is not based exclusively on Matthew 25, is required. Indeed, a greater pastoral appreciation of the traumas, conflicts and suffering experienced by prisoners, prison pastors, prison staff and, indeed, people in the wider world, is needed. The subjective world of the prisoner needs to be addressed in an effort to engage with his/her innate human desire for meaning and fulfilment. Consequently, my research claims that a theology of prison ministry must be based on *empowerment*. This empowerment can be found through a creative and meaning-centred response to the suffering of prisoners as illustrated in the lives of Viktor E. Frankl,¹⁴ Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn¹⁵ and Etty Hillesum.¹⁶

Interestingly, no extensive study of Rahner's theology of the prison pastorate has been carried out prior to my own research. I argue that it is necessary to place Rahner's understanding of pastoral ministry in *dialogue* with a praxis-based approach informed by those involved in pastoral ministry in correctional facilities. This praxis-based approach can help to provide a

13 Julia Martínez-Ariño and Anne-Laure Zwillig (eds.), *Religion and Prison: An Overview of Contemporary Europe: A Contemporary Overview, Boundaries of Religious Freedom: Regulating Religion in Diverse Societies*, Volume 7 (Cham: Springer Nature, 2020). Andrew Coyle et al., *Imprisonment Worldwide: The Current Situation and An Alternative Future* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2016). John D. Wooldredge and Paula Smith (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Prisons and Imprisonment*, Oxford handbooks in criminology and criminal justice (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018). Yvonne Jewkes and Helen Johnston, *Prison Readings* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006). Coretta Phillips, *The Multicultural Prison: Ethnicity, Masculinity, and Social Relations among Prisoners* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012).

14 Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy* (New York, NY: Beacon Press, [1959] 1985); *Trotzdem Ja zum Leben sagen: Ein Psychologe erlebt das Konzentrationslager* (München: Kösel-Verlag, [1977] 2016);.

15 For a detailed account of Solzhenitsyn's life and experiences as a prisoner in the Soviet Gulag camp system see Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago Volume 1-3: An Experiment in Literary Investigation* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2007 [1973, 1985]). The original Russian manuscript was written between 1958 and 1968 and first published in 1973.

16 For Etty Hillesum's writings see *Het Werk* (Amsterdam: Balans, [1986] 2012). Meins G.S. Coetsier & Klaas A.D. Smelik (eds.), *Etty Hillesum: The Complete Works 1941-1943, Bilingual, Annotated and Unabridged*, Vol. 1 & 2 (Aachen: Shaker Verlag, 2014). See also Meins G.S. Coetsier, *Etty Hillesum and the Flow of Presence: A Voegelinian Analysis* (Eric Voegelin Institute Series in Political Philosophy, Studies in Religion and Politics) (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2008); *The Existential Philosophy of Etty Hillesum: An Analysis of her Diaries and Letters* (Supplements to the Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy, 22) (Leiden/Boston, MA: Brill, 2014).

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theological foundation for further scholarly analysis of this timely and imperative subject.¹⁷

CONTEMPORARY PRISON TERMINOLOGY

Language is key in understanding both Rahner's writings and the contemporary area of pastoral ministry in prisons. The proliferation of terms such as 'prison pastorate,' or 'prison ministry' and 'prison chaplaincy', can often confuse since terms can be used in a variety of ways to mean very different things. In clarifying the usage and meaning of terms, it is important to mention that the words pastor, pastoral and pastorate are mainly used in relation to Rahner's theological understanding of the 'Prison PASTORATE'. As Rahner uses the term, a pastor, is an 'ordained priest', a 'man' and a 'leader' of a Catholic congregation. He is a person who gives advice and counsel, and maintains a careful watch over the spiritual needs of his people. Pastors are required to act like shepherds by caring for the flock, and a key part of this care includes teaching (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1; 1 Pet. 5:2). However, in my research the terms chaplaincy and chaplain are used in a more inclusive, modern institutional sense. Often the term chaplain refers to a cleric, for instance, a minister, priest, pastor, rabbi, or imam as well as a lay representative of a religious tradition, who is attached to a secular institution such as a prison, hospital or military unit. Further, the word chaplain refers to female and male representatives of the Christian faith as well as to people of other religions or philosophical traditions. In recent times, many lay people have received professional training in prison chaplaincy. When it comes to the English word 'minister', it is important to remember that it is derived from the Latin word *minister* which means servant and attendant. Minister is a broader term than chaplain as it represents people who are authorised to perform certain functions such as leading services, for instance weddings, baptisms or funerals, while also providing spiritual guidance to the community. Therefore, a German prison minister, who visits the inmates on a weekly basis may not necessarily

17 As far as I am aware, Rahner's contribution "Gefängniseseelsorge" ("The prison pastorate") has been occasionally referred to but has not been studied or analysed in detail. See the works of: Billy Farrell, "The Pastoral Care of Prisoners," *The Furrow* Vol. 30, No. 3 (Mar., 1979): 168-173 [with a reference to Rahner on p. 173]; Wolfgang Hartmann, *Existenzielle Verantwortungsethik: eine moraltheologische Denkform als Ansatz in den theologisch-ethischen Entwürfen von Karl Rahner und Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2005) [with a reference to Rahner's *Gefängniseseelsorge* on p. 258]; Paul Eppe, *Karl Rahner zwischen Philosophie und Theologie* (Münster: LIT Verlag 2008) [with a reference to Rahner's *Gefängniseseelsorge* on p. 189]; Andrew Skotnicki, *The Last Judgment: Christian Ethics in a Legal Culture* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016) [with a reference to Rahner's "The Prison PASTORATE" on p. 6].

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be the official chaplain of that prison. Each term has a different emphasis. Roughly speaking, the term ‘chaplain’ usually refers to a specific role and position within an institution, while ‘minister’ has connotations of a performative role in leading religious services, while ‘pastor’ refers to the leading of the flock.

REVERSING THE EFFECTS OF INCARCERATION

My research to date has developed a practical approach to the existential frustration encountered by those in prison, combined with an analysis of how this may be addressed by engaging prisoners in a search for meaning. This is done through combining Rahner’s pastoral theology with the timeless insights of Frankl, Hillesum, and Solzhenitsyn. The consequence of this is a theology of empowerment that supports both chaplains and inmates by confronting the oppression and pain of incarceration while also seeking to reverse its effects. A key point in my argument is that Rahner has limited his anthropology in ‘The Prison Pastorate’ by considering *only* how prison pastors themselves might find God in prison.¹⁸ Rahner makes an important decision to strengthen prison pastors so that they will see the value and meaning of such a challenging ministry. It is important to note that due to his specific focus and the limited time-frame of the original lecture where he first presented his insights,¹⁹ Rahner neglected to develop a clear argument for the empowerment of those incarcerated in prison systems. My own research seeks to address this gap and argues that theologians need to focus both on the prisoners and the pastors. Crucially, it is important for pastors to think about how prison ministry can be made more fruitful and beneficial for the prisoners entrusted to their care. Reality is seriously different, especially when viewed through the lens of a prisoner’s eyes and experiences. This was something Rahner’s theology bypassed from the outset. Moreover, unless we can help prisoners to make ‘larger sense’ out of this ‘apparently senseless suffering’,²⁰ as Frankl puts it, our ministry to the incarcerated will be empty and fruitless.

So, to determine the contemporary relevance of Rahner’s theology on ‘The Prison Pastorate’, as well as to move towards a more contemporary theology of prison ministry, three main objectives must be met. *Firstly*, it is important to review and critique Rahner’s theology of prison ministry. *Secondly*, areas where this theology fails to meet contemporary pastoral challenges

18 *MG*, 3: 74. *SW*, 16: 214. *SG*, 447.

19 *Ibid.* On Tuesday, 23 June 1959, Rahner lectured at a summer meeting of prison ministers (*Tagung von Gefängnisseelsorgern*) in Innsbruck.

20 Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*, 11.

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should be identified. *Finally*, in response to this, it is important to develop an empowering theology of prison ministry. In attempting to develop a theology of prison ministry, the situation faced by prisoners today in the German prison system and the suffering likely to be experienced by them, was an important and ever-present background and framework for my research.

It is important to appreciate the richness of Rahner's theological thinking and his anthropology, while acknowledging his influences on *Gaudium et Spes*. By reading and interpreting Rahner's writing of 'The Prison Pastorate' in the light of chaplains working professionally in prisons in the German-speaking world, it is possible to identify the limitations in Rahner's reflections on this topic. Indeed, through an examination of prisoners' perspectives based on their real-life experiences of imprisonment, in the works of Frankl, Hillesum and Solzhenitsyn it is possible to identify the *complex* needs and challenges likely to be felt by prisoners as well as possible responses. I argue that while Rahner's work is valuable and of significance on its own terms, it is limited when confronted with the complicated development of rapidly changing secular European communities. Therefore, while developing a theology of prison ministry, it is necessary to go *beyond* Rahner's position, by developing a more ecumenical, interreligious and less sacramental perspective. In doing this it is also important to appreciate that Rahner's writing is of deep contemporary significance and despite its limitations, continues to be of notable value. Therefore, my research attempts to develop and enhance Rahner's views with a lively pastoral theology that aims to strengthen and empower people in prisons through the adoption of a meaning-centred approach that acknowledges the role of prisoners as contributors in their own right to the process of rehabilitation. Using the pastoral principles of love, faith, and humour, that are found in the examination of Frankl, Hillesum, and Solzhenitsyn's work, as well as the spiritual dimension of art in all its forms, my research seeks to outline a theology that prioritises the cultivation of healing and hope in a way that respects and defends the dignity of each prisoner.

THEOLOGY OF EMPOWERMENT

In order to support a more contemporary and pastoral approach to prison ministry that is better able to meet the needs of prisoners today, it is important to focus on key elements such as dignity, meaning, transformation, liberation, creativity, hope, and community. A core aspect of a theology of empowerment focuses on gathering 'two or three' people in 'my name' (Matt 18:20) and experiencing the power and uplifting energy of the One who says: 'I

am among them'. This more community-based dimension of prison ministry is not addressed at all by Rahner in 'The Prison Pastorate'. However, for those with experience of providing pastoral care in a prison setting, this community aspect is essential. Thus, while accepting and greatly valuing the profound insights in Rahner's understanding of Matthew 25, a theology of empowerment moves beyond Rahner in the spirit of Matthew 18:20 in its appreciation that 'where two or three gather in my name, there am I among them'.

This theology of empowerment offers a framework of understanding and entails facing pastoral ministry in prison with spiritual confidence and social skill, with self-esteem and passion. For the incarcerated, participating in empowering activities is also an unrestricted way of dealing with the possibility of becoming a *different* person from the one who was sentenced to jail. Prison ministry thus becomes a mirror of Christian hope in the sense that providing pastoral care in a prison setting demands more than humans can do with their own abilities. Only with the help of God whose 'power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine' (Eph 3:20), can we hope to work together with prisoners and others in the prison community to empower prisoners to find meaning and hope in life. Empowering theology begins where Scripture ends: 'Be mindful of prisoners as if sharing their imprisonment, and of the ill-treated as of yourselves, for you also are in the body' (Heb 13:3). An empowering prison ministry echoes the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's poem 'By Powers of Good' that he wrote and sent out from jail in early 1945.

The old year still would try our hearts to torment,
of evil times we still do bear the weight;
O Lord, do grant our souls, now terror-stricken,
salvation for which you did us create.

[...]

By powers of good so wondrously protected,
we wait with confidence, befall what may.
God is with us at night and in the morning
and oh, most certainly on each new day.²¹

21 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, DBW Vol. 8. *Widerstand und Ergebung*, eds. Christian Gremmels, Eberhard Bethge, and Renate Bethge with Ilse Tödt (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1998), 607-608; DBWE Vol. 8. *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John W. de Gruchy (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 548-550.