

## MINISTRY AT REGINA COELI PRISON, ROME

Clare Pratt, rscj

During the spring of 1994 when I was on the probation team, I loved to go to the top of the Villa Lante garden to pray, looking out over the rooftops of Rome to the mountains beyond Frascati. Much closer in my line of vision was Regina Coeli prison, literally across the street from the Villa Lante. Described in a recent article as "The Black Hole of Rome" its foreboding appearance revealed no sign of human life other than the guards who walked back and forth along the top of the walls and the occasional shouts when a goal was scored during a soccer game in one of the inner courtyards. At night, especially during the warm weather when our windows were open, I could hear the cries of loved ones -- wives, sweethearts, friends, calling from the top of the Gianiculum hill with messages and words of comfort: "Giovanni .... I'm coming to visit you on Wednesday"; "Stefano .... I love you! We all love you!" Little did I dream then that just 18 months later I would not only be back in Rome, but ministering at Regina Coeli!

When I agreed to come to the Mother House to do a "behind-the-scenes" ministry within the four walls of an office, I asked Patricia García de Quevedo if I could do something a half-day a week with poor/marginalized people. I was hoping for something which would allow an ongoing relationship with people. Although Patricia was most willing, it was not at all clear to me what I might be able to do, given my then non-existent Italian and no real sense of what my job would entail. It was Toya Castejón, RSCJ who first told me that Regina Coeli took volunteers but that it was extremely difficult for non-Italians to get clearance. She herself had applied to the chaplain's office to go there for visits, especially with the Spanish-speaking, and waited for nearly a year before she was authorized. I, on the other hand, happened to have a combination which the chaplain desperately needed: I played the accordion and I had had a variety of experiences with liturgy in international or multi-cultural settings. So Padre Vittorio Trani, OFM sought me out, and at the end of October, 1995 I began a weekly ministry, going on Saturday mornings to prepare the Sunday liturgy with a "choir" of 8-12 "ragazzi" (guys) as Vittorio calls the prisoners, and returning for the 9:00 a.m. liturgy on Sunday. From the beginning, Vittorio gave me a free reign as far as the music was concerned, encouraging me to choose songs in different languages because of the variety of nationalities. Now, besides singing in Italian, Spanish and English, we have the second reading in Spanish as a matter of course, and the prayers of the faithful are in several languages. Besides my accordion, we have access to a guitar, an electric keyboard, 2 recorders, bongo drums and a tambourine. It is always exciting when a new member of the choir plays an instrument as well as sings!

One of the first questions people ask about Regina Coeli is "How did it ever get that name?" The prison, which is administered by the Italian Ministry of Grace (!) and Justice is well over a century old, built on property which was formerly owned by a monastery of Discalced Carmelite nuns. The new Italian state expropriated the property, the nuns moved out in 1873, and eight years later the prison opened, replacing a 17th century papal prison on the Via Giulia. Its name "Regina Coeli", which harks back to the nuns' chanting, seems incongruous at first glance, (I am reminded of an attempt a few years ago to name a U.S. submarine "Corpus Christi") but one of the things I have discovered here is a totally different relationship between Church and State than what is both theory and practice in the United States. Italian culture is so steeped in Catholicism that no one thinks it unusual to have a crucifix and picture of Mary and the Child on the wall of the guard's office at the entrance, or to have an enormous crucifix and statue of Mary in the rotunda where we have Mass, flanking a large plaque commemorating Pope

John XXIII's visit to Regina Coeli in December, 1958, just after his election as pope. As I write this, there is a large crèche set up in the rotunda, built by a group of prisoners, very much like those in the churches of Rome, so charming in portraying the birth of Jesus in an ordinary setting as people go about their daily activities. At the end of the Christmas liturgy this year (for which the 130+ men stood, as they do throughout every Sunday Mass -- there are no chairs), the director of the prison spoke, quoting Mother Teresa on the connection between poverty and freedom. He told the men "You are all poor by virtue of being here. But although you are denied your freedom, your real freedom is within you and no one can take that from you." (Imagine the director of a state or federal prison in the U.S. saying such a thing!) Several weeks ago, the Villa Lante hosted the prison guards for their annual Mass in honor of St. Basilide, martyr, their 3rd century patron. In the prayer to him the guards asked for "the light and strength to carry out our delicate mission with a Christian spirit, that we may be a help and comfort to all in their need." I have even received holy cards from guards on special feast days!

Prison ministry is not something to which I ever felt called or attracted. I am certainly no Sister Helen Prejean, and my personal interaction with the men is somewhat structured, given both the nature of what I am doing with them and my poor Italian. I don't ask them questions about why they are there, but listen to whatever they want to tell me. I know that most of them are being held pending trial (or during appeals processes which can take years), 80% of them for supposed drug offenses (many for drug trafficking). Half of 900+ inmates are foreigners, many from Algeria, Tunisia and Albania. Of the nearly 90 men who have been in the choir at different moments and for varying lengths of time, about two-thirds have been Italian. The others have come from France, Spain, Venezuela, Colombia, Uruguay, Guatemala, Nigeria, Zaire, Eritrea, Lebanon, and the United States. The prison has twelve sections of cells. Only six of those sections are allowed to have classes and the mobility that that implies. Choir is considered a class ("scuola di musica") and meets in a classroom. To join the choir one must write a "domandina" or request of the chaplain which then goes to the director for authorization. I never know from one week to the next who will be there. One may have a family visit or be with his lawyer; another may be working in the kitchen or somewhere else in the complex (for which he is paid); still another may be permanently gone: transferred to another prison to serve out his term, "expelled" to his own country, or set free. "Libertà" is a favorite word in the songs we sing and it is sung with feeling!

What have I learned during these fourteen months of weekly interaction with these men? Although I can never be completely sure I have the whole story, it seems that most of those I know are basically good men who have made some bad mistakes -- in some cases only once. I have heard all kinds of reasons for transporting drugs: treatments for a 4-year old daughter with leukemia, university tuition, living expenses, etc. Some of them seem to take advantage of the time in prison to get in touch with "what is inside" as one of them said. They share one another's joys and sorrows, and it is touching to see them greet one another as they pass each other in the hall or give the kiss of peace during the liturgy. One Venezuelan told me how much the Sunday liturgy means to him. He said "It is the one time in the week we are really a community." Another who is in the fourth year of a ten-year sentence said "When I am feeling down and am having a hard time remembering anything good that has happened during the week I think of our choir practice and the liturgy and my spirits are lifted.

I have had my stereotype of the prison guard greatly altered, if not totally changed. Many of the guards are the same age as those they are "keeping" and I have frequently witnessed interactions between prisoner and guard that are mutual, respectful and sometimes with a touch of humor. I realize that my vantage point is a

limited one, but I like to think that the quality of mercy is more pervasive than I would have imagined "from the outside."

I have learned that prison life is one long Advent -- waiting, waiting, waiting. I have had a taste of it myself in dealing with some of the bureaucratic procedures. Even getting from the street to the classroom requires going through eleven doors, locked with a key or electronically and often there is a wait at one or another. Many of the informal conversations I have with the men occur when we are waiting -- for a guard to accompany them back to their sections, and me to the chaplain's office. Those are the moments when I sense a real mutuality -- we're all in the same boat, totally dependent on someone else to unlock a door, powerless to change a system that has been running for better or worse for many years.

Although I have read that there are rats in the corridors and common areas, I have neither seen them nor heard a complaint about them. Nor has anyone talked about suicide attempts which I have heard are not uncommon. I can't imagine that it is legal to have a prison with no heating, but that is a condition which guards and prisoners endure together and it has gone on year after year! A Lebanese prisoner who is hoping to gain political asylum in Italy, told me that he is amazed that no one complains about the illegalities at Regina Coeli such as overcrowded cells. His observation is that each one is so focused on his own situation and trying to get his own process moving, that there is no sense of the wider picture or expression of outrage about conditions.

I experience a real sense of corporateness in doing this ministry. Toya is there on Saturday mornings having her visits while I have choir practice. She also comes to the Sunday liturgies. We know many of the same men, and about every six weeks the two of us go out for a pizza to "debrief". Members of my community have been able to come to the liturgy from time to time which is not only a joy for me, but gives them a "composition of place" when I talk about Regina Coeli. About eighty of the men are a bit warmer because of woolen caps knit by our sisters in Holland and Italy.

Finally, I am convinced that in a very real way my salvation is being worked out at Regina Coeli. I have come face-to-face with God in the most unexpected disguises and many levels of my being have been challenged. My deep and abiding feeling is one of tremendous gratitude for having found such a Eucharistic community in the very heart of Rome. I think I know why I am here. And I think I know why, at the age of eleven, I learned to play the accordion!

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