BEHIND THE PRISON WALLS

During my seven years as chaplain to Pentridge Prison, I occasionally arranged an informal Saturday morning visit for a member of the judiciary. It was not announced to either the administration or the inmates. The judge was simply introduced as a visitor whom I wished to inspect the prison and its operations.

Once I remember introducing a County Court judge to a man he had sentenced some weeks before to several years imprisonment. The fellow failed to recognise the judge, and the judge remarked to me afterwards that he now knew the advantage of wearing a wig and gown in court!

I often thought of the thousands of hours spent in criminal courts each year, in legal argument between the Crown and the defence and the judge, considering whether a convicted person should be sentenced to twelve months imprisonment, or whether the person was more worthy of a community-based order.

But had the Crown or defence or the judge any idea of the nature of the proposed sanction? Had they seen anything of the prison regime that was being considered? And if not, how could it be determined whether the convicted person should be sent down for one month or one year or ten years?

PUBLIC TOURS

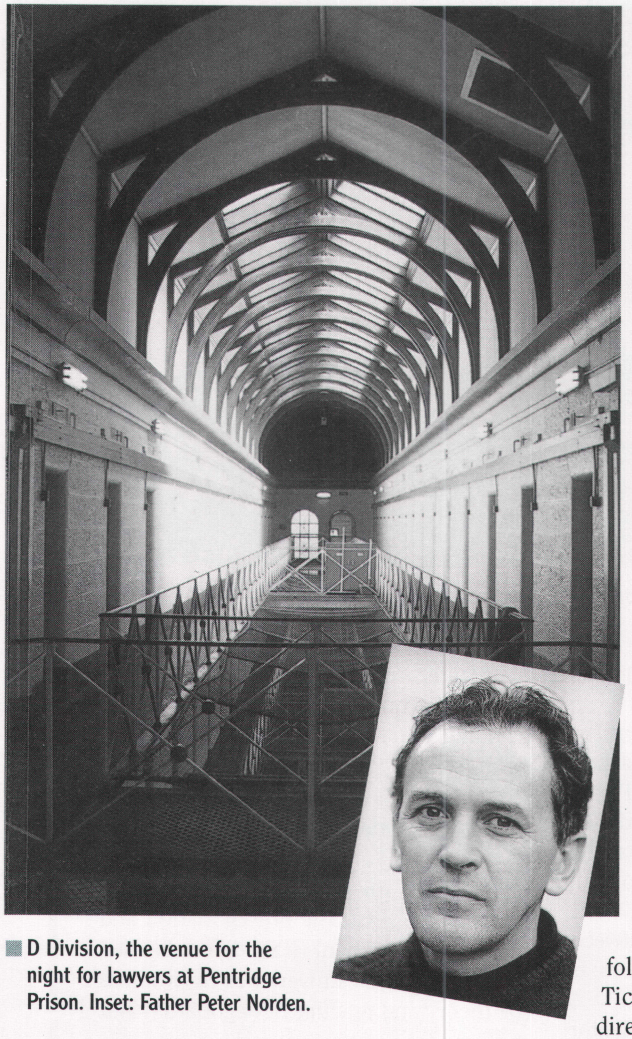
My special Saturday morning visitors could not believe the Pentridge remand yards, remarking that they looked like a scene from a Dickens novel. That is part of the reason why Jesuit Social Services sought and obtained permission from the Victorian government to "unlock Pentridge" during the early months of 1998, including sections never seen before by the Victorian public. This includes the infamous remand yards, which up until three months ago held almost 400 remanded persons awaiting the hearing of their charges, mostly held two to a single cell for sixteen hours a night. Those who were "on protection" were locked away for 23 hours a day, to avoid the inevitable verbal and physical assaults.

The section of the prison being opened up also includes the former Jika Jika maximum security section, closed down in 1987 by the then Victorian Attorney-General, Jim Kennan, who described it as "an electronic zoo".

The prison inspection also includes the gallows from which nine prisoners (eight men and one woman) were hanged, and the prison grave sites where these nine, and the remains of 34 others including Ned Kelly (relocated from the old Melbourne Gaol), remain buried in "unmarked graves" and, finally, the former Psychiatric Division, G Division, where "treatment" was provided for those who were considered mad and bad.

Visiting a prison as an insider like a chaplain, or a professional visitor, gives you only some idea, of course, of the experience of imprisonment. It is very different for the place to become your temporary home, whether for a few nights or a few years.

The problem with the community remaining ignorant of what goes on behind the prison walls is that the prison belongs to the community. The community pays for the operation of the prison system, and it needs to be as accountable to the wider community as are our schools, hospitals, childcare centres and retirement villages.



D Division, the venue for the night for lawyers at Pentridge Prison. Inset: Father Peter Norden.

A NIGHT ON THE INSIDE

Jesuit Social Services has also organised an evening for the legal profession on 2 April from 7.30-9.30pm within the wings of the old remand section.

Mr Justice Coldrey of the Victorian Supreme Court will speak on the history of Pentridge and imprisonment in Australia and Professor Ari Frieberg, Professor of Criminology at the University of Melbourne, will respond. Cocktails and light refreshments will be served from 7:30pm.

There will be a chance for members of the legal profession to view sections of the prison including the remand yards, the execution gallows and the prison grave sites.

The evening is being held in support of The Brosnan Centre, a program of Jesuit Social Services, which since 1977 has been assisting younger prisoners who need accommodation and support following their release.

Tickets for the evening, which is directed solely towards members of the legal profession and their partners, cost $40 per head. Bookings can be made through our prison hotline on (03) 9355 8500 or by sending payment to "Jesuit Social Services", PO Box 271, Richmond 3121. An entree card will be issued on receipt of payment. You will be assured of an interesting, enjoyable and entertaining evening!

For details of the public tour dates and costs, phone the prison hotline on (03) 9355 8500.

FATHER PETER NORDEN SJ
Director, Jesuit Social Services