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Pastoral Visits

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Visiting a Prisoner.

One of the saddest duties of a pastor is to minister to the spiritual needs of such of his members as are confined in penal institutions. We all agree that these unfortunates are in particular need of our spiritual ministrations. Such visits afford us an opportunity to speak not only of sin and its fearful consequences, but also of God's unending love and of Christ, our Savior and Redeemer. The prisoner behind the bars has had many hours, in many instances even days and years, for reflection. Quite frequently his former friends and even the relatives have severed all connections with him. He is indeed an outcast. No one has an interest in his well-being, often not even his former pastor. Some of the penal institutions are served by a missionary especially called for this purpose or by the pastor living near by. Nevertheless a pastor should keep in close touch with such a prisoner, either by corresponding with him or, better still, by occasionally visiting him. A prisoner surely stands closer to his own pastor than to the city missionary, and the former no doubt is better qualified to look after his spiritual needs. True, some of the criminals are "hard-boiled," and all our efforts may be in vain, but the majority will bid you a hearty welcome and willingly accept your services. Permit me to adduce a personal experience.

It was on a joyous Christmas Day, at 6 A. M., just before the opening of the service, when one of the deacons rushed into the vestry holding in his hand the morning's issue of the newspaper. In bold type across the top of the front page it was written: "Mr. R. killed Mrs. S., shot Mr. S., and then shot himself. Murderer not expected to live." Mr. R., though formerly a Lutheran, had long ago turned to evil ways. Only a few days before I had met him at the house of one of his friends. My first thought now was: If he still lives, is there any pastor to minister to him? What could I do to rescue the perishing soul? Such and similar thoughts filled my mind when I entered the pulpit and again when I left it. When the second service of that notable Christmas Day was ended, I forthwith went to the parents of the young man, with whom I was acquainted, too, to express my sympathy and to give them a word of comfort, above all, however, to ascertain what could be done to save the soul of that young man who was at the brink of death. Upon my question whether the son was still a member of the church, I was told that he long ago had forsaken His Savior, but that he had attended the Christian day-school at one of our sister congregations and that Pastor X. had confirmed him, that later he had been given to drink and had long ago turned his back to the church. Nevertheless I urged the mother to go forthwith to his former pastor and to tell him of

all that had happened and that he was now lying in the prison hospital with a bullet wound in his head. Strange, the pastor refused to see him "because he long ago severed his connections with the church"! I offered my services and went to the hospital that same afternoon. There he lay on his cot. Though the bullet had torn away one side of his temple, he had regained consciousness. He immediately recognized me. "My friend, what have you done?" said I and then held up before him the mirror of God's divine Law, pleading with him to think of his confirmation day, then on his past life and the sins he committed, and to consider well that he had provoked God's wrath and displeasure. With feeble voice he murmured: "I am a poor sinner. What did I do? Pastor, pastor, is it too late? Will Jesus forgive me?" It is not necessary to state that I now presented to him the message of God's redeeming love, a love which is as high as the heavens, as deep and fathomless as the ocean, as wide as the universe and as everlasting as the ages to come. I pointed him to the case of David, who, too, had committed murder, but was assured of forgiveness by God's prophet when he showed himself a truly penitent sinner.

For a long time this man hovered between life and death. In the first few weeks I came to see him every day. Gradually he recovered. He was then transferred to the jail. For half an hour each week I was permitted to see him, being locked up with him in his cell. Those were precious visits indeed. Each visit was a Bible hour and an hour of prayer. Three months had already elapsed since the terrible crime had been committed, and he had not been called for the preliminary hearing. True, he had been charged with assault to murder, which covered the lesser part of his crime against Mr. S. (who also recovered); but, strange to say, the records knew nothing of the murder he had committed. So one day, after a visit at the jail, I happened to meet the attorney who was to defend the young man. As we met in the corridor of the jail, I asked what chances his client might have on the day of his trial. "Sorry," said he, "no hope whatsoever. I see nothing but the gallows." I expressed my surprise that his case had not yet been called although nearly three months had elapsed and asked whether there was not a law in our State according to which a prisoner could demand his freedom if for some reason or other he had not been brought to trial within a certain time. The attorney admitted that there was such a law. Excitedly he begged to be excused to go down to see the records. In a few minutes he returned, stating that, if they failed to call him within ten days, he indeed had every right to claim his discharge. He was not called to trial until three weeks later.

When the court was called to order, the case of Mr. R. was announced. The attorney for the defense requested me to step up, so

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that I might hear the entire proceedings. After the usual preliminary remarks the attorney for the defense addressed the court, requesting that the client be discharged because he had not been called to trial within the specified time. When the judge asked how much time had elapsed, he was given the desired information. The State's attorney was taken by surprise and demanded a postponement of the trial to give him time to look into the matter. But what was I, his pastor, to do? It was no fault of the prisoner's that he had been forgotten in his cell and had not been called to trial. To say the least, these were trying moments for me. Just how must I properly advise him, so that, even should his life be spared, he might have a good conscience as long as he lived? I finally urged him to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, no matter what the ultimate result for him might be, and told him to be ready to receive the extreme penalty. — This, too, was the substance of my discussion with the attorney, whom I met a few days later. I stated, however, that in my opinion the judge might be requested to be lenient with the prisoner. I believed if the prisoner pleaded guilty of murder (with which crime, according to the records, he had by default of the State's attorney, not been charged), the court might be asked to inflict on him the minimum punishment for murder and strike out the charge of assault with intent to kill. In this way, in my opinion, the department of the State's attorney would forestall just criticism, while, on the other hand, the prisoner would have a good conscience for all time to come.

Finally the day for his trial was set. I will never forget the moments as we stood before the judge — the prisoner and I in the center, the attorney for the defense to the left, and the prosecuting attorney to the right. The judge, it seemed, had carefully studied the case. It was evident that some one had failed to do his duty. The judge asked the prosecuting attorney as to his intentions in the case pending at this time. As he shrugged his shoulders, the attorney for the defense begged leave to submit a statement. "Your Honor," said he, "the Rev. F. C. S., here present, pastor of the client, has a solution, I believe, for the problem confronting us. Will His Honor permit him to submit his opinion?" "The reverend gentleman may speak," said the judge. Thereupon I briefly stated that I had been in close touch with the prisoner from the day when the crime was committed until that hour; that I at all times had felt it to be my duty to impress upon him the seriousness of the crime committed by him and to advise him to plead guilty and be prepared to suffer the extreme penalty; that I, however, believed that His Honor might be lenient in his verdict if he pleaded guilty of murder inasmuch as the prisoner had not been properly called to trial and therefore, according to law, was at least entitled to such leniency. If it would please

the court, I would suggest that, if the prisoner plead guilty, His Honor inflict the minimum punishment for murder and strike out the charge of assault with the intent to kill which is pending. The prosecuting attorney consented, and the judge ordered the prisoner "to be taken to his cell and the reverend gentleman be closeted with him to induce him to enter his plea of guilty and upon conclusion of their deliberations to return to this court."

The prisoner and I were led away. Being alone, I explained to him what it all meant. His first question was: "Pastor, do you think that it will be the right thing for me to do?" He did not for a moment think of denying his guilt in court, — no, he was ready to admit everything, — but it was not clear to him what "minimum punishment" meant. He was convinced that he deserved nothing less than the gallows. I again urged him to tell the whole truth and to plead guilty; but the outcome of the trial, I said, was in the hands of God, who according to His unbounded wisdom governs everything in human affairs; also the heart of the judge, I added, was in His hands. Being satisfied that he was not burdening his conscience by his plea of guilty, we informed the clerk that we stood ready to reappear before the judge.

Half an hour later the plea of guilty was entered, and the verdict was: "Remanded to the State Prison at J. for a term of from one to fourteen years and the other charge of assault with intent to kill stricken."

I felt it my duty to visit him once each month at the state prison. How grateful he was to see me, especially as his wife, his relatives, and his friends had turned away from him. How strange that sometimes even some of the Christians of whom we should expect it least resent any effort on the part of their pastor to win the souls of such outcasts! But we know that there is joy in heaven over even such criminals if they repent. This criminal was truly penitent. He daily read *Das walte Gott!* the book of devotions collected from Dr. Walther's writings. His Bible and his prayer-book were his constant companions. On good behavior he was released after seven years and four months. At a time of a serious riot at the prison he valiantly stood by the prison authorities and thereby reduced his term considerably.

How necessary such visits at the penal institutions are every one can readily see that has made an attempt to minister to the spiritual needs of any of his flock confined there. While I was seated at a table with a prisoner under my spiritual care, a prisoner on the other end of the table whispered to me, "When you get through with your man, will you see me, too?" I did. Then he, who was a stranger to me, said, "Pastor, you do not know me, but I know you. About five years ago you preached at our church at a mission-festival. I never forgot what you said, not even your text." And he mentioned it. With

tears in his eyes he then related that at one time he had been a good member of his church, attending the services fairly regularly. He then spoke of his downfall; he had pilfered money from letters at the post-office. He was sorry for his deeds; indeed, he was on the verge of despondency, so that even the thought of doing away with himself and "ending it all" had entered his mind. Yet a few Bible-verses that he remembered had always given him strength to overcome the temptation. "But I can hardly bear it any longer. All have turned against me — my family, my friends, and seemingly also my pastor. I never saw him since I was committed to jail; I never received a word or letter from him. Oh, how it would cheer me to receive only a card!" And in that same strain he continued. I gave him ample time to unbosom his heart, and I listened attentively. This gave me an opportunity to diagnose his case and to ponder which remedy I might offer him from "God's Medicine Chest," which is so complete that it has not only one specific, but remedies for all the sorrows of a troubled soul. I pointed out to him that his misdeeds were sins indeed, with which he had offended his Lord and God and given offense to his church, his family, and his friends, and that he deserved the punishment he was suffering now. Yet he should not despair. Though all had seemingly turned against him, he still had one Friend whose love never grows cold, who was always ready to receive him and always willing to listen to his prayer. And as to his pastor, he surely remembered him in his prayers. Would his pastor not welcome a line or two from him in which he would express his regret for his misconduct and for the offense given? No doubt he would then write to him or even come to console him. — Before I bade him farewell he was visibly cheered, and he requested me to call on him at my next visit to the penal institution.

Let us remain in contact with such unfortunate prisoners and do all in our power to save their souls. Fortunate is he who need not wend his way to the prison door to look after such erring sheep.

Chicago, Ill.

F. C. STREUFERT.

Dispositionen über die von der Synodalkonferenz angenommene Serie alttestamentlicher Texte.

Erster Sonntag im Advent.

Ps. 24.

Neues Kirchenjahr, neue Serie. Aber nicht neue Lehre, sondern das alte Evangelium, das der unveränderliche Gott sowohl im Alten als im Neuen Testament geoffenbart hat. Wir dieselben Menschen, Sünder. Er der alte Gott mit der alten und stets neuen Gnade. Der König der Ehren, Jesus Christus, kommt in angewohnter Pier; wir wollen in altgewohnter Weise ihn begrüßen.