

### **Faith Inside: a guide for Catholics in prison**

They know that you know that they have a “past” and, for some of them, it is pretty horrible. You do not ask why the courts handed down a prison sentence.

*....trying desperately hard to turn life around and to make a new start.*

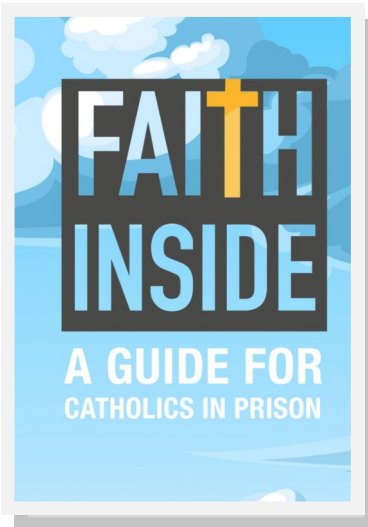
Instead, you meet them as they are now: men and women who are trying desperately hard to turn life around and to make a new start. It is not easy.

Many know only too well the seriousness of the crime for which they were locked up and will spend the rest of their life coming to terms with their actions. For some, anger and violence became a way of coping with an unstable childhood, the innocent victims of circumstances beyond their control. For others, drug and alcohol dependency led to actions which, today, they would never think of repeating. There are as many different causes as there are individuals.



*Sister Janet Fearn (left), Fr. McGhee and colleague on day of launch of book*

The reason why Redemptorist Publications took up the request to produce a catechetical resource for use in prisons across the UK is because there was an urgent need. It is exactly the same reason why I agreed to lead the project and have lived with it 24/7 for almost two years so far and will continue into 2017 and for as long as it takes. From the very start, *Faith Inside: a guide for Catholics in prison* was something we quickly recognised that God wanted and we **needed to follow a path which none of us expected.**



## Catechetical Outreach in Prison

Article written by Sr. Janet Fearn FMDM

My own role took me into a couple of prisons to meet some amazing people who have found God, turned their lives around, but must still serve out their sentences. After the first visit, I went, not because it was part of my job, but because I really wanted to catch up with people. One man remarked, “I tried so many times to say sorry to my victim’s family but they refused to accept my apology. In the end, in my misguided thinking, I thought that if I were to kill myself, my death would repay their loss. As it happened, when I attempted to hang myself, I was found, cut down and resuscitated – and here I am today. What I have learnt is that, even if the family cannot forgive me, God can and I must also forgive myself. Instead of taking life, I want to rebuild life and make good. In that way, my victim did not die in vain.”

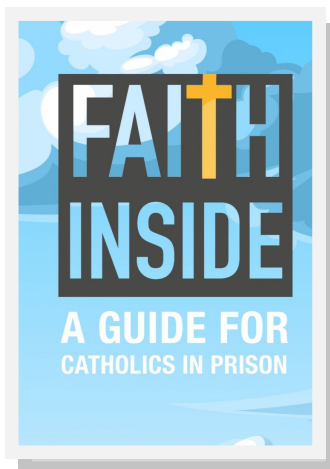
One prison chaplain laughingly emailed that she would soon have to stop asking for prayers for her weekly Faith Group, currently working its way through a book written by Father Richard Rohr OFM. “When I started this group in February, there were about six participants. By September, there were thirty-five and we had to bring in extra chairs. I am not sure how many more chairs are available if the group grows any bigger!”

Many people find that their prison sentence turns their thinking inside-out, upside-down and back-to-front. Perhaps for the first time, they ask who they are, where they are going and who they want to become. In that questioning, they discover God and gradually allow God to reveal previously undreamed possibilities. Thus, despite the many challenges of their imprisonment, for some, their sentence is a time of conversion and of faith. As a Scottish chaplain remarked, “There are some very fine people in prison”.

### **Creating *Faith Inside* was no simple task.**

It must cater for great differences in literacy and education. There was the further challenge of creating something which chaplains might easily adapt to individual circumstances and needs. In discussing release and rehabilitation, it should accompany men and women serving both short and long-term sentences without crushing the hopes of those who still face many years behind bars.

Importantly, ***Faith Inside*** must allow for periodic lockdowns when prisoners are confined to their cells and cannot meet up with others who are following the programme. It must also, smoothly and without interruptions, accompany someone transferring between prisons, speaking to young offenders just as much as to those who are nearing the end of their whole life sentences.



***Faith Inside*** begins with the participant’s arrest and looks towards the possibility of release and rehabilitation, taking the inmate on a journey through fundamental Christian beliefs, prayer, the sacraments, coping with death and bereavement, and preparation for release. Some themes receive special treatment: forgiveness and reconciliation, sickness, death and dying, marriage and family life, all of which are massively important to people in prison.

The resource consists of a 156-page book for each prisoner, which they can personalise and keep. There is also a 92-page leader's book which the chaplain may adapt for use in individual or group situations. Fr Eddie McGhee, the author of both the Leader’s and the Participant’s books, has himself served fifteen years as a prison chaplain in Scotland.

Although prison’s ultimate goal is the rehabilitation of offenders, **the reality is a daily encounter** which challenges their sense of self, family, faith and future. Many also meet further stressors in the form of radicalisation, drug abuse, self-harm and other negative agendas. *Faith Inside* thus attempts to nurture and support a growing recognition that God forgives long before society unlocks prison doors: a new start is entirely possible.

***Faith Inside: a guide for Catholics in prison***, providentially, was published within the Holy Year of Mercy. Pope Francis promised that the door of every prison cell is a Holy Door of Mercy on a par with those in every diocese across the world – including St Peter’s. In 2014, when he visited an Italian prison, the Pope wished that for each inmate, their sentence might be “a precious time”, when each could “contribute to bettering, first of all, yourselves but at the same time the community as well, because for better or for worse our actions affect others and the whole human family”.

**In this Holy Year of Mercy**, *Faith Inside* attempts to support each prisoner, whatever their story, on a personal pilgrimage towards a new life, helping “the least, the last and the lost” on their journey to God.

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*Total prison population (2 Sept 2016) 84,914 Foreign nationals (31 March 2016) 9,971 Male 81,069 Female 3,845*  
*Countries represented (2016) 166 Christians (2016) 41,940 as percentage of total prison population 49.3%*  
*Catholics (approx.)- E&W(2001) 17% Scotland (2008-2009) 23%*