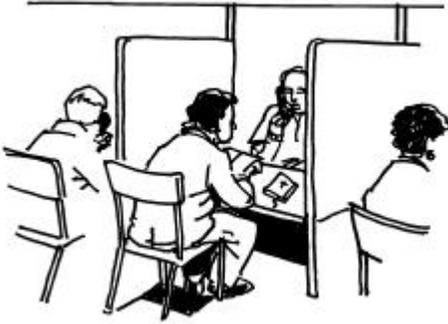


## There but for the grace of God

Tom Gallagher | Sep. 14, 2009



(Pat Marrin)

Our prisons were once known as "penitentiaries," an idealized term to be sure, but one that nonetheless conveyed a message: A prison sentence need not represent an end, but instead a transition.

Not anymore.

Today, more than 2.3 million Americans -- one in every 100 U.S. adults -- reside in a federal, state or local prison or jail. Isolation from society and punishment, not penance or repentance, are why these institutions exist. The idea that imprisonment can serve a larger purpose, that lives can be changed for the better, is largely lost.

For one Connecticut man, John Santa, life changed forever when his friend and business colleague, lawyer Stan Kennedy, pleaded guilty to four counts of first-degree larceny. In November 1997, Kennedy, then 69, began a 15-year sentence.

Santa and his family own Santa Energy Corporation, a Bridgeport, Conn., home and commercial heating oil and mechanical services business. The company was a victim of Kennedy's theft. Kennedy was both a family friend and the company's outside lawyer for 40 years.

Soon after he settled into prison life, at the urging of a priest, Kennedy wrote Santa and his three brothers in an attempt to reconcile. Santa wrote back. Eventually, Santa went to visit Kennedy.

"It was like a bad dream," said Santa. "It was my first time visiting a prison. I couldn't get my head around the fact that my friend was living in prison."

During the next three years of visits, Santa began to dream. He asked Kennedy, "How can we get you out of here?" Kennedy knew that if he had any chance of redemption and a normal life, he needed a job. Santa went to work.

Santa convinced executives of a truck leasing company to come to Enfield Correctional Institution to meet Kennedy. After an hourlong interview, they decided to offer him a job once he left prison. Almost four years

after he entered prison, Kennedy was a free man, released on good behavior.

"John Santa saved my life. He gave me my life back," said Kennedy. "When you receive that kind of forgiveness, you feel that you can be redeemed. I can't describe it any other way."

In a twist of fate, Kennedy was given the role of aide to the chief financial officer at the trucking company.

For Santa, this experience opened his eyes to the plight of the imprisoned. He became passionate about prison ministry. He founded a not-for-profit organization that ultimately became Malta Prison Volunteers of Connecticut. Kennedy is a founding member of the board of directors.

Deacon Dennis Dolan, a 16-year senior Catholic chaplain for the Connecticut Department of Corrections and a board member of Malta Prison Volunteers, points out that prison ministry is a simple, yet powerful experience. "Prison ministry is the most Christian ministry because we are called to love our enemies," said Dolan.

"In all my years in prison ministry, we've never lost a volunteer who quit or lost interest," he said. "The volunteers have an experience of Christ because the circumstances are so raw." Dolan points out that prisoners are typically very spiritual people, receptive to the Gospel.

In 2005, the Connecticut group was adopted by the American Association of the Order of Malta (of which this writer is a member) as a national service program. Today, more than 20 Malta areas are implementing a prison ministry program based on the Connecticut experience.

Meanwhile, the Connecticut group's newest initiative is called the Prodigal Project, which targets two key groups: ex-offenders and employers. Ex-offenders must be supported by the state Department of Parole and one of three designated social service agencies. A key element of the social services agencies is that they work with ex-offenders before, during and after their release from prison.

Employers who hire ex-offenders receive tax benefits, highly loyal employees and a better and safer community in which to function and flourish. Twenty-three volunteers have joined Santa's Prodigal Project. They are tasked with facilitating job opportunities and raising awareness about the need for jobs for ex-offenders.

Some seven years after beginning his new job with the trucking company, Kennedy went into the president's office to inform him that he would be retiring. "The company has been very good to me and you saved my life," he told him.

"You earned it," his boss responded.

*Tom Gallagher is a regular contributor to NCR. Ideas for a "Mission Management" story? Contact him at tom@tomgallagheronline.com.*

### **Online resources**

Malta Prison Volunteers of Connecticut

[www.mpvct.org](http://www.mpvct.org)

The Pew Center on the States report "One in 100: Behind Bars in America 2008"

[www.pewcenteronthestates.org/topic\\_category.aspx?category=528](http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/topic_category.aspx?category=528)

The U.S. bishops' 2000 statement "Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice"

[www.usccb.org/sdwp/criminal.shtml](http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/criminal.shtml)

Federal Bureau of Prisons  
www.bop.gov

**Support independent reporting on important issues.**



---

**Source URL (retrieved on 06/27/2017 - 02:09):** <https://www.ncronline.org/news/there-grace-god>

**Links:**

[1] <https://www.ncronline.org/donate?clickSource=article-end>