

FATHER FRANK'S LOG: 21st – 28th APRIL 2024

As we approach Good Shepherd Sunday, I am reminded of the year I spent as Catholic chaplain to a young offenders' institution back in the 1990's, filling in for the regular chaplain who had gone on sabbatical. One of the chaplains from another Christian denomination, someone whose company I really enjoyed, was an actual, working shepherd from Ayrshire. He would regularly bring in his shepherd's crook, a beautifully carved wooden object, as fine as any bishop's crozier, and use it creatively to illustrate bible stories during prayer services. It was a very challenging period of my life and one which I learned a lot from. One of the things I remember is that when I would have the freedom of a particular wing to visit the cells of young Catholics, having been given a master key to open all the cell doors on that wing, the way of identifying the cell of a Catholic was that there was a green card inserted into a slot on the cell door with their name on it, along with some other details. It was then up to the young offender whether they wanted me to enter their cell for a chat, or not. In all the time I was there, not one person refused me entry, whether it was that they really wanted to chat to the priest, or whether it was just something that would break the monotony of their daily routine. It was the same with Masses and services. These were always very well attended, for whatever reason, and I can only hope that this corporal work of mercy did some little good, for at least one or two young people, during my time there.

This memory sparked another, earlier memory from the 1980's when, just after ordination, I was based in St. Mungo's, and we would take turns at the weekend, filling in for the chaplain to the Glasgow Royal Infirmary, a member of the Passionist community, so that he could have a bit of time off each week, usually from a Friday evening to a Sunday afternoon. He would then return from his well-earned breather to celebrate the hospital Mass, aided by a team of volunteers who would ensure the safe passage of the patients from their wards to the place where the Mass was to be celebrated, and then bring them back again. When we were fulfilling this role, the practice was that, when the Catholic chaplain was called out to attend a patient, day or night, and the patient was administered with the Sacrament of the Sick, or the Last Rites, as many people still refer to them, the chaplain would then write on the patient's card that they had been attended by the priest. I think the intention was that, if the patient was later to take a turn for the worse, then the nurse would be able to tell the family that they had received the Sacrament, and so there was no need to send for the priest again. Nine times out of ten, of course, that family would want the priest sent for again, often at 2 or 3 in the morning, but you just accepted that as part of the ministry, and part of a dying person's family's vulnerability at such a difficult time. The detail I want to recall, however, is that the note on the patient's card saying they had been attended to, had to be written in green ink. So, between the green card on the cell door of Catholic young offenders, and the green ink to indicate that a Catholic had received the Last Rites, there was obviously something in those days that associated Catholics with the colour green. I wonder what that could be?

Of course, Good Shepherd Sunday is also Vocations Sunday, and my main job at that time, which was my first appointment after ordination in 1983, was as Vocations Director for the Passionists in Scotland. I wish I could look around our province now and be able to point out all the many members whom I brought into the order back then. Sadly, while there was a decent number who joined over the three years I was in the role, they nearly all subsequently left. I could quote the great Bob Dylan in saying that "*there's no success like failure, and failure's no success at all*". However, the privilege of accompanying young people on their journey for a while, trying to discern what God was calling them to, even if it wasn't to the Passionist life, was something I believe was worth doing, and not really a failure at all.

As ever, protect yourself, your loved ones and others, and protect Christ in your lives.