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The Criterion Online, Archdiocese of Indianapolis

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Recommended Citation

Shaughnessy, John, "‘Crazy’ suggestion leads to God’s purpose for his life" (2018). *1975–1999: David T. Link*. 29.

<https://scholarship.law.nd.edu/dtlink/29>

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‘Crazy’ suggestion leads to God’s purpose for his life



Father David Link has dedicated his life to prison ministry for nearly 20 years. He will be the keynote speaker at a corrections ministry conference in the Archdiocese of Indianapolis on Nov. 3. Here he is pictured outside the South Bend Community Re-Entry Center in South Bend, Ind. (Photo courtesy of Santiago Flores, South Bend Tribune.)

By John Shaughnessy

As he prepares to go to prison again, Father David Link shares the story of the “crazy” suggestion that led him to discover God’s purpose for his life.

The suggestion was made before he became a priest, back in the time when his life was marked by these achievements: dean of the law school of the University of Notre Dame for 24 years, founding president of Notre Dame Australia, and co-founder of the Center for the Homeless in South Bend, Ind., that has helped many people change their lives.

At dinner one night, his wife of 45 years Barbara suggested that he give a talk to prisoners at the Indiana State Prison in Michigan City.

“I thought it was crazy,” he recalls. “I told her, ‘I spent my whole life training prosecutors, and you want me to talk to people who had been successfully prosecuted. Why would I do that?’ In her wonderful way, she said, ‘I think you’ll like it.’ I went over to the prison thinking how horrible it would be to tell Barbara she was wrong.

“They put me in a room with 65 lifers. They were all there for murder from what I could detect from them. And there was no guard. I’m panicking.”

Yet as he left the prison, he knew that Barbara had been right. He enjoyed the experience and wanted to do more.

It was the beginning of a journey of nearly 20 years—and counting—in prison ministry, a journey which also led him to be ordained a priest, five years after Barbara died in 2003.

Now 82, Father Link will share the story of that journey as the keynote speaker during the archdiocesan [Corrections Ministry conference](#) that will be held at St. Paul Catholic Center in Bloomington on Nov. 3.

In anticipation of the conference, The Criterion interviewed Father Link, a father of five and grandfather of 15. Here is an edited version of that conversation.

Q. You and your wife Barbara were married for 45 years. Considering your life now, what are your thoughts of her, and what do you think she would think of your life now?

A. “Barbara was the Michael Jordan of spouses. She did everything above the rim. In 45 years of marriage, she never asked for anything for herself.

“She would love what I’m doing. She would think this is exactly what the Holy Spirit and she wanted me to be doing. I love being a priest, and I love working with prisoners.

“She’s still talking to me. In the prison as I’m advising someone, she talks to me.”

Q. After Barbara died in 2003, what were the circumstances—and what was in your heart—that led you to become a priest at the age of 71?

A. “It was a conspiracy. It was a combination of my late wife, [Holy Cross] Father Ted Hesburgh [then president emeritus of the University of Notre Dame], the Holy Spirit and my bishop. The four of them got together and decided they wanted me to become a priest. Barbara talked to me about it. Father Ted talked about it. Bishop [Dale] Melczek [of the Gary Diocese] said, ‘I need a chaplain for the seven northern Indiana prisons. Would you be interested?’ I said I thought about becoming a deacon. He said, ‘I thought about you becoming a priest. I will ordain you to the priesthood and assign you to prison ministry.’ ”

Q. You’ve been a priest for 10 years. You have joked that every time you look in the mirror in the morning, you think, “What’s that priest doing in my bathroom?” Seriously, how would you describe this part of your life as a priest?

A. “I’ve now figured it out. He’s getting ready to go to prison. This part of my life as a priest is to serve the least, the last, the lost and the lonely. I’m a servant.”

Q. Including your time in seminary, you’ve been working in prison ministry now for about 20 years, often in the Indiana State Prison in Michigan City where many of the men are there for violent offenses. What have you learned about the people you meet through your prison ministry?

A. “I don’t want to be sappy about it, but they’re all children of God. They’re not all bad people. Many of them are good people who made some horrible decisions in life. But as I read Scripture, they’re all subject to redemption. And my job is to tell them what redemption is all about. My relationship is one of friendship. I tell them to keep their heads up, and God will come to their assistance.”

Q. Could you share one or two specific situations of working with people in prisons that has had a lasting impact on you?

A. “There is a prisoner who ran one of the most violent gangs in the country. He’s a tough guy with all the tattoos you can imagine. He spent most of his time in solitary confinement, but he got a family visit. His brother and sister came. And his sister came with his two nieces.

“In the course of that conversation, one of the nieces said, ‘Are you going to try to be good so we can come back and visit you again?’ This big, tough guy said he went back to his cell, got on his knees and cried. He prayed to God, ‘Make me the kind of uncle my nieces deserve me to be, and me into the kind of man that God created me to be.’

“He completely turned his life to God. He’s gotten off of the drugs he used, and he’s a completely different person. He’ll be at my Mass on Sunday. He’ll be urging others to give their life to God. He’s gone from being a tough guy

to being a prison minister to his fellow prisoners.”

Q. What would you tell people about the importance and value of ministering to those in prisons?

A. “They need help. Most of the people in prison have no idea of their life’s purpose. They don’t know where they’re going. Most people share that. They don’t think, ‘Why did God put me here on Earth?’

“God put me here to serve the poor, the homeless and the incarcerated. That’s my purpose in life. Your vocation is what you do to make a living. Your purpose in life is what you do to make living worthwhile. It causes me to ask that question whenever I’m one-on-one with prisoners. ‘Why did God put you here? He has a purpose for you.’

“God wants us to help others. I subscribe to the theological theory that when we go to heaven, God isn’t going to ask us, ‘What did you do with your life?’ He already knows. He’s going to ask, ‘Did you try to fulfill the purpose for which I sent you?’ And, ‘Who did you bring to heaven with you?’ Barbara can say, ‘I brought David along.’ ”

Q. The theme of the Corrections Ministry Conference for the Archdiocese of Indianapolis is “My Heart Near to Your Heart.” How does that theme align with and reflect your approach to prison ministry?

A. “My heart is next to the heart of those prisoners. No question about it. When I started this, I assumed that these are bad people. They’re not bad people. They’re children of God, and I’m their friend. This is why God has put me on Earth—to be their friend, their mentor, to let them know someone cares about them. God cares about them, and he uses me to express that care.”

Q. You were the dean of the law school of the University of Notre Dame for 24 years. You were the founding president of Notre Dame Australia, and you co-founded the Center for the Homeless in South Bend that has helped numerous people change their lives. Even with all these accomplishments, when it comes to prison ministry, you say, “This is why God has put me on this Earth.” Please expound on that statement.

A. “It was all just preparation for what I’m doing now. If you would have predicted that my wife would pass, that I would go to seminary, that I would end up serving maximum security prisoners, I would have thought that was a sign of a mental breakdown you had. And I would have tried to find you a good doctor. None of that was in my plan. But it turns out it was in God’s plan.” †

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