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Priest, an ex-ND law dean, finds 'a family in prison'

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MICHIGAN CITY — The hummingbird is flitting around the high dropped ceiling. It dashes frantically past the prominent red and gray sign — “But for the Grace of God” — suspended from the ceiling of the dilapidated chapel. The bird lands briefly on an arrangement of plastic flowers atop a high shelf and takes off again.

Mass has ended, but some hangers-on dressed in prison tan-and-white are lingering in the chapel’s bolted wooden seats. Some are keenly following the progress of the little bird, which has apparently flown in through through a window or propped-open door of the sweltering chapel.

“I wish I could get him out of here,” one says, running through possibilities.

“I’ll feel bad if he dies in here,” another says.

The irony is not lost on the Rev. David Link.

Having removed the vestments he wore while helping to celebrate Mass earlier, Link is at home with the men of Indiana State Prison in Michigan City.

He knows most of the residents of “The City” have committed awful crimes. More than 70 percent are murderers. But Link also knows their humanity.

Link, now 81, enjoyed a storied career as a tax attorney, dean of the University of Notre Dame’s law school for 24 years, and the founding president of Notre Dame, Australia. He and his wife, Barbara, were married 45 years and raised five children together before she died in 2003.

But in the 10 years since he was ordained as a Catholic priest, Link has found family within the walls of northern Indiana’s prisons.

A new mission

Volunteer chaplain Clarence O'Connor, a retired union worker, can still see in his mind's eye the spring day he and Link were walking through the main gate of Westville Correctional Facility years ago, after Link had first celebrated Mass there.

"We stopped walking, and he looked at me," O'Connor says. "He said, 'Clarence, this is why God put me on this earth.' "

It was a revelation Link says he never envisioned as a young tax attorney, or even after returning to Notre Dame as the dean of its law school in 1975. He and Barbara were active in civil rights issues, and he was involved in the building of South Bend's Center for the Homeless in the 1980s. Still, he paid little attention to the criminal justice system.

It was Barbara who suggested over dinner one night that he talk with prisoners. He made the trip to The City just to prove her wrong.

"They put me in a room with 65 lifers, all in for murder, no guard. And I'm panicking. I'm the only non-felon in the room," Link says. "I gave a lecture: 'How should you treat your lawyer? While you're in prison, how do you relate to your lawyer?' The question-and-answer period blew me away, it was so good. They had deep thoughts, and I really enjoyed it."

Not long after that, Barbara died of cancer.

Aware of Link's popularity as a prison lecturer, the bishop of Gary's diocese called.

"I need a chaplain for the seven northern prisons. Would you be interested?" he asked.

"I've thought of becoming a deacon, so I could do that," Link recalls of his offer to the bishop. "The bishop said, 'That's funny. I thought of you becoming a priest.' "

Because of his earlier education and the urgent need for a prison chaplain, Link spent an accelerated 2 1/2 years in a Wisconsin seminary, driving down on weekends to work in the prisons.

He was ordained at the age of 71.

Where the love is

Father Dave on most Sundays drives to The City from his South Bend home.

On a recent day, after passing through security and a series of prison bars clanging behind them, Link and other volunteers walk through the main compound of buildings and enter

the chapel. They retrieve what they need from lockers around the room, marked by the various religions that practice here: House of Yahweh. Wiccan. Buddhist. Catholic.

Father Dave, also called “Doc” because of his five doctoral degrees, encounters prisoners and various other volunteers with a handshake, a joke, a hug.

David Parrish, a Native American from Indianapolis who made the necklace Link is wearing, is setting up to play guitar for the service.

“I’m at Catholic Mass because this is where the love is,” Parrish says. “Even when they’re not feeling good, they come and they love us. Why wouldn’t you want to be part of that?”

Parrish was on the streets at the age of 14, plunged into a world of gangs and crime and desperation. In prison, he says, he’s found the support to lay off drugs and alcohol.

“I have a better family in prison,” he says, “than I ever had outside prison.”

Volunteer Margaret Brooks says Link relates with prisoners and is humble, despite his lofty credentials.

“He exemplifies to us being open and receptive and welcoming in the spirit of Christ,” she says. “He helps to create a sense of family and community with his presence.”

Michael Prendergast, a deacon who retired after 34 years with the FBI, has volunteered as a prison chaplain for 17 years and says attendance is high because church is one of a prisoner’s rare reprieves.

“He doesn’t have to be a gang member, a murderer, a rapist. He can just be a guy in church,” Prendergast says. “A lot of guys, this is their two hours where they don’t have to worry about anything.”

Nodding toward Link, Prendergast says, “A lot of the reasons the guys come here is because of him. Because he makes you feel like a person, not just like a number.”

Being a priest

Charles Sturgeon, who goes by Isaac, is waiting for Mass, sitting in a wheelchair with one leg raised, foot in a boot. Just weeks earlier, he — and Link — were told Sturgeon would lose the foot and possibly the leg to issues related to his diabetes.

Sturgeon’s toes were black and infected. Prison officials sent him to St. Anthony’s Hospital in Michigan City.

“Father Link prayed, anointed my foot with oil, and the congregation prayed,” the 73-year-old Sturgeon says.

When they next checked, doctors found no sign of the infection.

“That was a miracle,” Link says.

Sturgeon has been in prison 22 years and, with a life sentence, knows he will likely die here, although he says he has been sober during his stay. Link is helping him with paper work to go before the clemency board.

Link will speak with anyone who needs him, but his lifetime of straight talk and learning about people have served him well.

Dan Milne, who Link affectionately calls “Danno,” has lived here 28 years and faces 32 more. Link “talked me off the ledge,” the 53-year-old says of motivation to do the right thing.

“He’s a great man,” Milne says. But “if you’re wrong, he’s going to tell you you’re wrong.”

As a prison priest, Link is often called to hear confessions, including for those in solitary confinement. He knows parish priests would be shocked at some of the things he hears.

But he says he feels most like a priest while helping men cope with the death of someone they love, while knowing they can do nothing about it.

About four years ago, an inmate with whom he had been working died. A man from the crematory called Link to ask for the widow’s address, to mail her husband’s ashes.

Link was incredulous.

“I said, ‘These are the remains of a human being,’ and the guy from the crematory said, ‘Oh, no. This was not a human being. This was a prisoner,’ “ Link says, indignation flooding his voice. “I swear to God. Those were his exact words.”

Link told the man to have the remains ready for him to pick up so that he could take them to the widow himself.

“That’s the attitude of a lot of people, unfortunately,” the priest says. “They don’t believe that they’re human beings.”

Some people should spend the rest of their lives in prison, Link acknowledges. But men often do turn their lives around. Prisoners are often capable of doing good.

Several years ago, Link was called to help defuse a situation in segregation, where a guard had forgotten to close an inmate's cell properly. The man took a counselor and guard as hostages and was threatening to kill them.

Link was watching when two other prisoners walked in. One distracted the hostage taker, while the other freed the hostages. But Link learned the next day the two hero prisoners were punished, sent to segregation, because they were involved in "a prison fight."

"It was clear (the hostage taker) was berserk. Would he have killed those two people? No question in my mind," Link says, astonished that the two other prisoners were not rewarded for their bravery.

Still, Link returns.

"I have no fear of death," he says. "My philosophy, theology, whatever, is, Why should I worry? Actually, I look forward to it. I look forward to going to heaven."

A peace plan

Link knows prison is a dangerous place. But he's learned the prisoners have his back.

During Mass on a recent July day, Link stumbles when a still-healing hip gives out during Communion. Observant prisoners rush to help him back to his chair. They carry his vestments back to the storage locker. After Mass, they persuade him to hop aboard a golf-cart-turned-fire-truck for a ride back to the main building.

Walking through the series of clanging prison doors, Link passes a man being wheeled out to a waiting ambulance. While other prisoners were spending a couple of hours of reprieve during Mass, this man was apparently stabbed.

During hot summer days, an average of one prisoner a day will be stabbed with a makeshift weapon, Link says. And this man was young. Odds are high he'll be stabbed again.

The priest doesn't blame prison authorities. They work with what they have.

"People know I could retire," Link says. "They all say, 'Why do you try to help these terrible people?' 'Oh,' I say, 'I don't give second chances. I give first chances.'"

He never asks what a prisoner did to be sent to The City. What matters to him is who the person is.

Link now gives talks around the country involving prison issues, including the death penalty and parole reform.

Published in the back of a 2013 biography about his life, titled “Camerado, I give you my hand,” is Link’s 10-point “A Crime Peace Plan.”

He’s been hard at work revising that plan, and he hopes to re-release it soon. Among several other issues, Link stresses the need to improve the parole system by moving decisions to local authorities rather than Indiana’s parole board, whose members don’t know either the prisoner or the communities where they would be released. He also suggests bringing into the process people in prisons who have a sense of whether an inmate has turned his or her life around.

“I could name right now 25 people who ought not be at Indiana State Prison, or ought not not be at Westville,” he says, adding with a chuckle, “I could also name 25 people living in Granger who ought to be in prison.”

“Take Isaac (Sturgeon), with his foot in a boot. What kind of danger is he on the outside? He couldn’t run from here to that truck. Plus, he’s had over 40 years of sobriety. Is that the same guy who came to that prison? No, of course not,” Link says. “And Danno (Milne) did some really bad things as a youth. Came out of a terrible family. He’s not the same guy who came into that prison. … Some of ‘em grow up.”

Link also makes an economic argument to Indiana legislators : It costs a great deal more to warehouse prisoners than to send them through four years of college.

“We ought to substitute the mission of healing for the mission of punishment,” Link says, pointing out that 97 percent of prisoners will be released. “Now do you want somebody who has been in a long time and is bitter and will blow your head off in a traffic situation? Or do you want someone who is healed?”

And Link says churches, free of governmental reach or political considerations, must weigh in.

“When’s the last time you’ve heard a sermon on prisoners? Nothing. Rare,” he says. “The churches have got to take some responsibility.”

Sometimes, Link admits, what he sees and hears leaves him in tears.

But he intends to follow his calling, as long as he can.

“I love what I do,” he says. “I hope to do it until I die.”