

Notre Dame Law School

**NDLScholarship**

---

1975–1999: David T. Link

Law School Deans

---

1-7-2015

## Holistic Prison Ministry: Author Q&A with Maura Poston Zagrans

Sean Salai

*America, The Jesuit Review*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.law.nd.edu/dtlink>



Part of the [Legal Biography Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Salai, Sean, "Holistic Prison Ministry: Author Q&A with Maura Poston Zagrans" (2015). *1975–1999: David T. Link*. 27.

<https://scholarship.law.nd.edu/dtlink/27>

This News Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Law School Deans at NDLScholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in 1975–1999: David T. Link by an authorized administrator of NDLScholarship. For more information, please contact [lawdr@nd.edu](mailto:lawdr@nd.edu).

# Holistic Prison Ministry: Author Q&A with Maura Poston Zagrans

---

Sean Salai

January 07, 2015

---

*Maura Poston Zagrans is an American Catholic poet, author, and photographer. Her book “Camerado, I Give You My Hand,” published by Image in August 2013, tells the non-fiction story of Father David T. Link, a Notre Dame University dean and lawyer who became a priest at 71 after his wife died and now works as a Catholic chaplain to inmates at Indiana State Prison. To research this book, Mrs. Zagrans went “behind the razor wire,” where she spoke with and photographed prisoners at maximum, medium, and minimum security penitentiaries. A mother of six, she is also the author of “Miracles Every Day: The Story of One Physician’s Inspiring Faith and the Healing Power of Prayer.”*

*On Dec. 8, I interviewed Mrs. Zagrans about her writing and work.*

---

ADVERTISEMENT

---

## Why did you write this book?

I wrote this book because the life story of David Link is fascinating, life changing and significant. He is a powerful force for changes that will fix our broken criminal justice system.

This is the story of a man who has it all. And yet, instead of enjoying an easy retirement, 78-year old Link spends his days in some of the most violent prisons in our country. Why? What on earth compels him to do such a thing?

---

ADVERTISEMENT

---

Link’s career as an attorney took him all over the world. As Dean of the University of Notre Dame Law School for nearly a quarter century, Link’s vision of the law as a healing force was the guiding philosophy that steered NDLS into national prominence. He embraced social activism in the 1960s and, for the rest of his life, found time to help people cast off by society as “the least, the last, the lost, and the lonely.” Father of five and grandfather of fourteen, Link was married to the love of his life for 45 years. After she died of cancer, he answered an entirely new calling to minister to his brothers behind bars and became, at the age of 71, a priest and full-time prison chaplain.

I wrote this book so that I could understand the story behind this story.

## Who is your audience?

People who love this book are seekers who sense that something is missing in their lives and people who feel uneasy at the current state of our society. His example shows us that we can reinvent ourselves and find greater satisfaction when we do. His story provides a vivid template of how we can be happy and attain a sense of fulfillment.

This is a book that has much to say to our policy makers and elected representatives. Attorneys, judges, law enforcement and corrections officers, nonprofit workers, and people in the caring professions will better understand the point of their professions after reading this book.

Some of my most heartwarming reactions have come from mothers and fathers who say this book helps them spot the essential in a world overstuffed with junk. One mother touched me deeply when she confided that after reading the chapter “Prison As Community,” she bought a silver charm of the moon, and she wears it on a chain around her neck. It is her reminder to step outside and admire the celestial gifts of the universe each and every night.

### **How did Father Link come to your attention?**

I first heard about David Link in April 2010 in a business meeting on the campus of Notre Dame. It was an electrifying moment. A thumbnail sketch of the beloved dean delivered an arrow straight into my writer’s heart. I knew in an instant that this was my story.

Some of the buzzwords that caused this intense and instantaneous reaction included his legendary compassion for the homeless as well as his reputation for cherishing family, education, ethics and justice. All of these are passions of mine.

### **If you could tell people one thing about Father Link, what would it be?**

Though Father Link is discerning, brilliant, wise, experienced, insightful, witty and compassionate, his most exceptional attribute is his optimism. For example, he says that he does not miss Barbara, whom he has loved and cherished since they were high school sweethearts, because she is still with him every day and every night. Still his partner in everything he does, he believes that she is a more influential partner from her position in heaven even more than when she was here on earth. That’s the most optimistic view of widowhood I have encountered.

### **As an outsider, what did you learn from your time inside of these prisons?**

Going into maximum-, medium-, minimum-, and re-entry prison facilities taught me that every life has potential. I learned that no life should be tossed aside, abandoned or thrown away, as is currently the practice in our prison empire.

When I began working on this book, I was like Father Dave in that I assumed the criminal justice system was doing the job we taxpayers believe it should do. Tragically, this is not so. I came to understand that prisons are a new kind of ghetto. Michelle Alexander views the American crisis of over-incarceration as the “new Jim Crow” and she is correct. Father Dave goes even further: he sees it as a new form of feudalism.

When I went to prison, I saw that redemption flourishes in fields that would appear on the surface to be fallow.

Many of the 2.3 million incarcerated people in this country have themselves been victimized by the great divide of poverty, or by an educational system that is weak in communities where strength is most needed, or by culture and by legislative policies that ensure there will be an ample number of scapegoats for generations to come.

We dump our scapegoats into prisons and declare that they are being rehabilitated. But the fact is that very few prisoners have access to education, substance abuse programs, counseling, training, therapy, drug therapy and treatment for mental illnesses, and just simple human-to-human contact.

We are proud of the medical and psychological advances of our age. And yet we do not implement knowledge and treatment strategies for the human beings entrusted to our care by the criminal justice system. This is unforgivable and it is foolish, for no one in the free world is untouched by the effects of such self-destructive practices.

**Restorative justice has become a growing Christian ministry in many prisons. In your view, what needs to be “restored” in our criminal justice system?**

What must be restored to the criminal justice system is the original purpose of the law. That purpose is not to punish but to heal.

It's simple, really. All we need to do is apply the principles of the medical model to our code of justice. Provide triage to victims and perpetrators at the point of entry into the system; diagnose the problems; and implement appropriate treatment measures.

I talked with Norwegians who explained their country's attitude toward crime, which is to ask, “In what ways have we as a society failed this person?” In Norway, criminals are sent to prison but there, people commute from the prison to jobs in the community. At the end of the workday, they report back to the facility for group and individual counseling and skills training. The purpose of incarceration is to give each person a chance to fill in the blanks, so to speak--to replace gaping holes with strategies for dealing with the problem. The philosophy is to provide whatever that person may have missed in his or her childhood or young adulthood, or to correct what went awry along the way. This approach makes sense. It is effective. It is humane. It is a better way for a society to react to crime.

In America, one of the best ways to make a difference on a person-to-person basis is through Christian prison ministry. It is impossible to overstate how important it is that we maintain some sort of connection to our brothers and sisters behind bars. In many cases, church volunteers are the only people they can look forward to seeing and talking with on a regular basis. The human connection is critical.

**Your first book, also a non-fiction biography, talked about the everyday miracles which occur through prayer. Are there any miracles occurring in our nation's prisons?**

I encountered evidence of miracles every time I went behind prison walls. I was humbled by the number of men who wanted nothing more than the chance to tell me about their life-altering experiences--inexplicable moments so powerful and out of the ordinary, nothing but the grace of God could possibly have been at work.

One common theme ran through each of their testimonies: the hand of friendship extended to them by Father Link was often the first miracle that started a rippling cascade of miraculous events. *Camerado* abounds with beautiful stories of the healing hand of God at work inside the prisons. One prisoner, now a free man against all odds, told me that he is living proof that God is still in the business of making miracles. My interviews with incarcerated men offer convincing evidence that he is exactly right.

**Many American Catholics have no idea what the inside of a prison looks like. What would you say to them?**

I would say that knowing what goes on inside our prisons is an essential responsibility of all American Catholics. Bishop Dale Melczek (Diocese of Gary, Indiana) told me that he believes if Jesus were walking the earth today, he would be engaged in the same kind of prison ministry as Father Link. If the New Testament example of Jesus Christ is not convincing enough, we have only to look to our Pope Francis for an example of how important it is that we take love and friendship to the darkest corners of suffering.

And yet, even when the heart is willing, it is not always easy to find a point of entry where we can fulfill a role in prison volunteering. This is why we should establish a national organization that links together those who are called to serve with the people who live and work in our underfunded prisons and homeless centers.

My dream is to establish a Camerado Corps (modeled on the Peace Corps). The Camerado Corps would act as a matchmaker between individuals who want to share their special gifts with prisoners or with people who are homeless. What Father Dave's experiences show us is that when we reach out to help people who are standing on the cusp of redemption—people who need someone to extend the hand of friendship--then two things happen. First, the healing hand of God will do the rest. Second, we ourselves are often enriched far more than the people we think we are helping.

Father Dave and I are doing everything we can to make this dream of a Camerado Corps come true.

**The title of your book comes from a Walt Whitman poem. Why did you pick it?**

The title comes from a line in the last stanza of Whitman's "Song of the Open Road" in *Leaves of Grass*. The full stanza reads:

Camerado, I give you my hand!

I give you my love more precious than money,

I give you myself before preaching and law;

Will you give me yourself? will you come travel with me?

Shall we stick by each other as long as we live?

*Camerado, I Give You My Hand* is the perfect title for my book for three reasons. First, it provides a framework for understanding why Father Link's prison ministry is so successful. He is not interested in giving handouts. Instead, he offers the hand of friendship to prisoners who are ready to walk beside him in a journey characterized by mutual discovery and reciprocal respect. Second, the title references crucial aspects of Father Link's life story, including his careers in law and

ministry, his social activism, and, importantly, the relationship between him and his life-long camerado, Barbara. Finally, the title suggests what all of us must do—or, more accurately, who all of us must be—if we are to make the most of this privilege we have of being Catholics. We must be camerados.

**What do you hope readers will take away from this book and from your work?**

The most important message of my work is that who we are cannot be separated from what we do.

Like Father Link, I also want to make the most of this one life that I have been given. Each and every one of us has been given special gifts. Each of us has been placed on this earth to accomplish specific things. As for me, I fear the day when I will stand before my God if I have not used my time on earth wisely. What explanation could I offer for wasting the gifts He has given me? How could I justify ignoring the opportunities He has provided so that I can use these gifts? That image makes me want to try my best to fulfill all the purposes He intended when He breathed life into my soul.

**Are you working on any other projects right now?**

My next book will be about hospice caregivers. They are a special breed. Not many can do what they do. What is it that calls them to minister to the dying? What sustains them? And what does world history teach us about this practice, which is a relatively new American tradition?

First, however, I want to find a way to get the Camerado Corps on its feet.

**What's your favorite scripture verse and why?**

I was not surprised to hear Father Dave's answer when I asked him this very question. Kindred spirits in many ways, it was perhaps predictable that we would both love the Beatitudes above all other scripture.

The Beatitudes speak to me in ways that never cease to inspire. My favorite toys have always been words, and I find the succinct juxtapositions in these verses utterly fascinating. Matthew 5: 1-12 is arguably the quintessential expression of the most enduring (and troubling) juxtapositions of life itself. The significance of these lines is that they provide a road map for the Christian journey. Reading the Beatitudes centers me. Keeps me on course. Reminds me of the blessings with which I have been showered, and how undeserving I am to be so privileged. And inspires me to be a better camerado.

**Do you have any hopes for the future?**

My hopes for the future are as innumerable as clouds skittering across moody March skies, and I cope with the insistent terror of their endlessness by turning them into prayers.

I hope and pray that America adopts the Crime Peace Plan as outlined by Father Link in the Afterword of my book, and that the Camerado Corps becomes a reality. Together, they would transform America.

It seems that the world is hell-bent on self-destruction, but solutions to the most perplexing issues are within our power.

Wendell Berry writes in his wonderful *This Day: Collected & New Sabbath Poems*:

As for “wild,” I now think the word is misused. The longer I have lived and worked here among the noncommercial creatures of the woods and fields, the less I have been able to conceive of them as “wild.” They plainly are going about their own domestic lives, finding or making shelter, gathering food, minding their health, raising their young, always well-adapted to their places. They are far better at domesticity than we industrial humans are. It became clear to me that they think of us as wild, and that they are right. We are the ones who are undomesticated, barbarous, unrestrained, disorderly, extravagant, and out of control. They are our natural teachers, and we have learned too little from them.

One of the miracles for which I hope and pray is that people choose to go backward in time. Live more simply. Live with compassion, restraint, and kindness toward all living creatures. The world is groaning under the weight of greed; it is time to take only what we need, as do animals in their natural habitat.

All of us have been given only this one amazing chance to live. My life is no more and no less precious to me than yours is to you, or, for that matter, the cow’s is to the cow. I hope that we are finally able to get it right: to live and let live. To act as if every moment counts (because it does). To be children who make God smile.

### **Any last thoughts?**

One of the most empowering things I learned from Father Link is that authentic happiness is ours when we listen carefully for successive callings of the Holy Spirit.

Whenever Father Dave made it to some pinnacle of achievement, he never rested there for long. Instead, he stirred himself from that place to serve in some radically different capacity.

As I describe in *Camerado*, Father Link believes that when we are called to meet our Maker, we will not be asked what we have done in our lives. Rather, God will question us about whom we have brought with us to the gates of Heaven. For Father Link, whether we have journeyed alone or with camerados is what makes all the difference, both in this world as well as in the next.

This is a practical life philosophy that holds unlimited potential for infusing hope into a universe that is on its knees, begging to be healed.

***Sean Salai, S.J., is a contributing writer at America.***

