

SPOTLIGHT

He's spent years in prisons and has earned the trust of some of Victoria's worst criminals.
But he's one of the good guys. **CARLY CRAWFORD** reports

FATHER FIGURE

THERE was a moment inside Port Phillip Prison that jail chaplain Father Joe Caddy will never forget.

It was Sunday morning mass and an inmate named Bob — a very hard man with a very violent past — kneeled at the pew in the prison chapel bowing his head and clasping his hands.

Behind him, a loudmouth crook started mouthing off.

Bob gritted his teeth. Fr Caddy spoke on.

The loudmouth got louder.

Bob's knuckles grew whiter.

The loudmouth kicked back, placing his feet on the back of Bob's pew.

Bob snapped and silenced the loudmouth with his fierce, icy glare.

"That was the first time I saw the murderous look in his eyes," Fr Caddy recalls. "That's when I thought he was capable."

In the charged prison atmosphere, Fr Caddy is always on guard.

"Prisons by their nature do have some pretty dangerous people in them," he says. "The antenna is up, the third eye is there whenever you walk across the yard."

"There are people who owe people, there are people with grudges against others — you certainly need to be alert to what's going on."

"You've got to know what's going on because you could just naively walk into situations where you're not supposed to be. You have got to know how the place works."

The chief executive of social welfare agency Centacare, Joe Caddy has been a priest for 18 years.

He has specialised in social ministry for about 12 years, eight of which he has spent working in Victorian jails.

Each Sunday, he ministers to the bad and the broken inside Port Phillip Prison, the Metropolitan Remand Centre and the Melbourne Assessment Prison.



Secrets: Fr Joe Caddy talks to an inmate. Pictures: DAVID CAIRD

We meet him at the MAP on Spencer St, where he walks the corridors — opening doors with the required eye scan — like the place is his second home.

Fr Caddy is a vault when it comes to personal confidences.

His warm smile evaporates, briefly, when asked if he has worked with gangland accused Mick Gatto, who spent time in Port Phillip before he was acquitted of the murder of underworld hitman Andrew Veniamin.

"All the people there, yeah — but I'd rather not say," he answers.

Not surprisingly, he meets plenty of characters.

"I never leave the place without experiencing something amusing," he says.

A young man once came into confession and recited his long list of crimes.

"It was like he was reading his own charge sheet," Fr Caddy says with a smile.

He has heard all the boasts from inmates who like to talk about the

time they took on violent standover man Alphonse Gangitano and won.

But Fr Caddy can generally find some redeeming qualities.

"I know a lot of the stories behind what people have done, and I know their offences — they're quite often terrible offences that people have committed," he says.

"The community is rightly very upset by them and the victims are extremely impacted by it, but to hear those stories and to find that person who isn't really a monster — to find the humanity behind the person — still continues to surprise me at times."

"I continue to just give thanks that even in those cases you can still find the goodness in people."

"Some you do have to search harder than others."

The number of prisoners with mental and intellectual impairments, or drug and alcohol

addiction, inside the system concerns him.

"These are the big reasons people end up in prison," he says.

"I'm not saying they don't offend — they do — but the prison system itself is principally managing people, instead of addressing their particular problems."

Born and bred in Melbourne's northern suburbs, Fr Caddy studied commerce before turning to theology and studying briefly at a pontifical university in Rome.

"I started doing commerce and thought: 'Christ, save me'," he jokes.

With his kind eyes and quiet, steady voice, Fr Caddy has won the confidence — and confessions — of some of the hardest crooks.

"There are some people who are trying to come to terms with some really awful things that they've done," he says.

"How can they begin to move forward and make up for what they've done?"

"I have had some conversations with people about that."

"It's always been in the context of what can they do to help make amends, really."

Has he ever stumbled upon a chilling confession?

"No — but I'd never relate it any further — what people say stays with me," he says.

"I don't know what they've told the courts and I don't always

believe everything I'm told either. The court has got more rigorous testing of truth than I have."

"But there's always a context to that — if life is in danger or there's something serious there, of course I wouldn't allow people to be exposed to that."

It is the role of the jail chaplain to listen, Fr Caddy says.

"By and large, the chaplains are seen as a group of people who work well with the prison," he says.

"But they're not part of the system so people feel a little more free to let their guards down, to speak to them in a way they can't perhaps speak to any of the officers or other inmates."

Department of Justice figures show that Catholics make up about one-quarter of the prison population. Most of those inside are not practising, but Fr Caddy is content enough when those who need him seek him out.

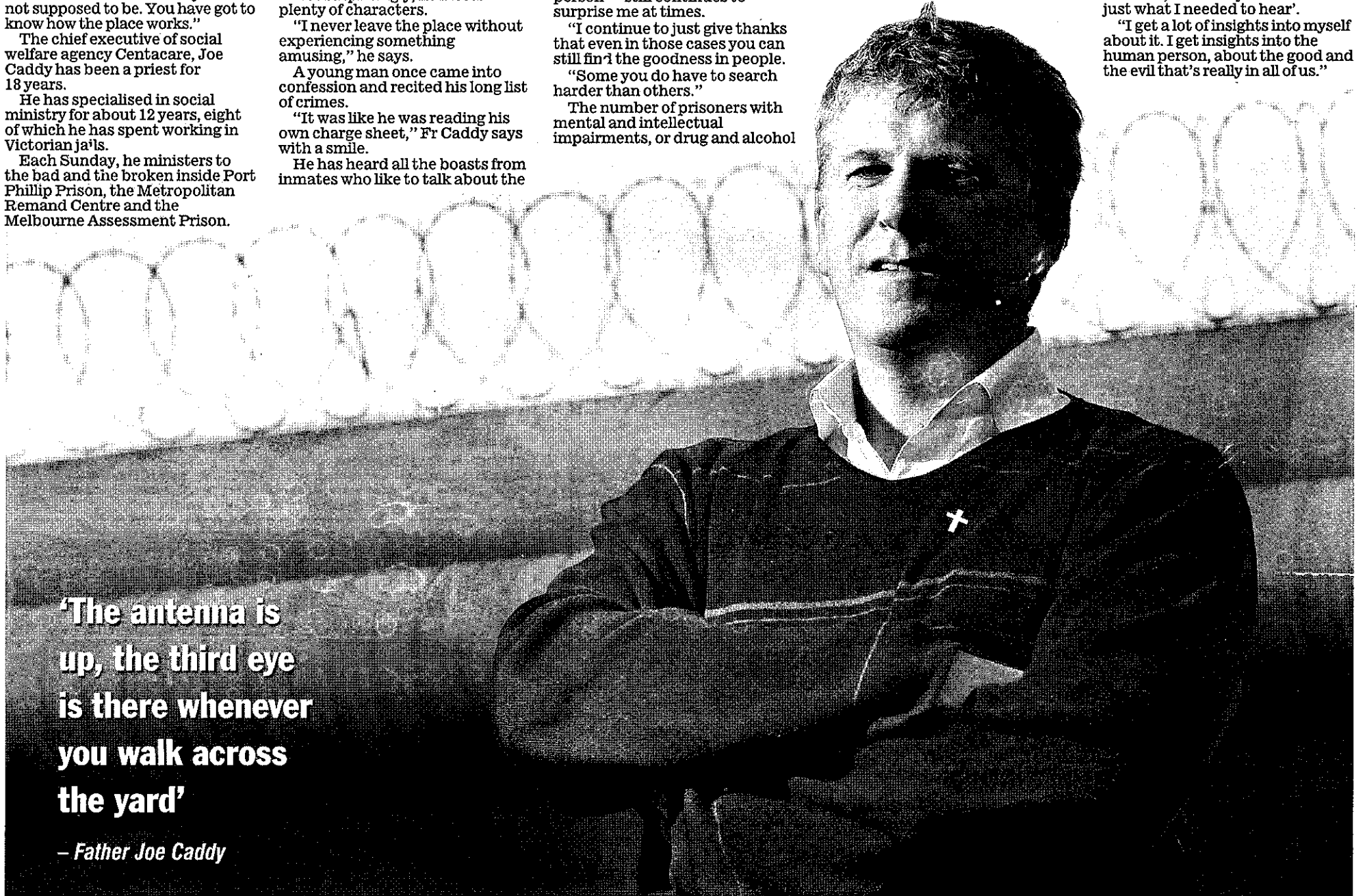
"If you ask generally, most people are respectful and happy to have you around," he says.

"The vast majority also don't want to have anything to do with you, and that's OK — those that do know it's there and know they can use it."

He took up the prison work for a very simple reason: "My archbishop told me to."

He has kept it up for other reasons: "I find it enormously satisfying when someone says, 'Father, no one ever talks to me like that, or 'What you said was just what I needed to hear'."

"I get a lot of insights into myself about it. I get insights into the human person, about the good and the evil that's really in all of us."



'The antenna is up, the third eye is there whenever you walk across the yard'

— Father Joe Caddy