

SYMBOL OF FAITH



Fr Joe Caddy's work in Melbourne prisons has taught him there is humanity in everyone.

Catholic priest Father Joe Caddy's Sundays are spent with high-security "parishioners".

Be on guard, be polite, do not stare, walk straight lines, keep the faith. Father Joe Caddy has religiously followed these and other jailhouse rules while ministering to his parishioners in Melbourne's volatile high-security prisons - Port Phillip Prison, the Metropolitan Remand Centre and the Melbourne Assessment Prison - nearly every Sunday since 2002.

He provides pastoral care, an ear and a shoulder, conducts Mass and, often, "very mature confessions on being, what they've done in the past, their future and the seeking of peace".

"There is a whole system ready to judge and convict. I am there for a whole different purpose," he said.

Fr Caddy, who is also CEO of the Melbourne Archdiocese Catholic social service organisation Centacare, said the visits had taught him that humanity exists in all people.

The first time he met Peter Norris Dupas, for example, the notorious serial killer offered chives from his personal garden. Fr Caddy walked away believing he had found humanity in the darkest corner of the darkest heart.

Two years ago he was handed a Christmas card from the "Big House Crew of the Hells Angels of Australia".

"It was presented with all sincerity and thanks for all that [Centacare] chaplains were doing for their members in jail - it was all peace and goodwill," Fr Caddy said.

"The community is rightly upset by what some of these people have done, especially the victims, but I find goodness as well as evil in people."

And while his parishioners include violent criminals and celebrity gangsters, he points out that the notorious are a smidgen of any prison population. His real concerns lie with the motley crew of mainly young men who have "dropped into society's bottom-drawer".

"Sadly, the poor and deprived are filling our prisons. They have no social networks, little education or opportunity, come from poorer suburbs, are drifters and in and out of jail," Fr Caddy said.

"The devil makes work for idle hands and the rest is history - they are the real underbelly of our society, and far from the swaggering gangster-type."

Fr Caddy's first glimpse of jail life was as a teenage volunteer at Coburg's infamous

Pentridge Prison not long, he laughs, after guards ceased taking prisoners down Sydney Road on trams for city court appearances.

He has been a priest for two decades, after abandoning a commerce degree, specialised in social ministry for most of that time and has become one of Victoria's most respected prisoner rights advocates.

He has called for a greater range of sentencing options, for prisons to focus less on managing people and more on dealing with causes of offending and for governments to "get more serious" about the post-release needs of inmates.

"Tougher penalties risk hardening young offenders who are forced to survive a system that does not address the reasons why so many young people wind up in our jails," Fr Caddy said.

"The prison population is over-represented by people with a mental illness or disability. There are young people I have spoken to who do not know if they are on remand or have been sentenced. They are unsure of their release date or even why they are in prison.

"Sick offenders should be treated, the disabled cared for, the poor afforded opportunity and the addicted directed towards rehabilitation."

Fr Caddy hopes more legal practitioners will become vocal to the cause, "especially as they understand a purpose of the *Sentencing Act* 1991 is to promote public understanding of sentencing practices and procedures".

"Whatever you hear in the media you know the reality is a lot more complex, and we could probably all do a better job in bringing some other perspectives to what often is a one-sided debate," he said.

On that point, Fr Caddy told a 19 May Melbourne Catholic Lawyers Association breakfast that prison had taught him a lesson in one-sided debates.

It happened when he was conducting Mass at a remand centre attended by a "colourful and notorious" criminal identity. In the back row another inmate was making random comments.

"My regular parishioner said 'Excuse me a minute, Father' and then, very forcefully, said 'Colin keep quiet, get your feet off the seat and sit up straight,'" Fr Caddy recalled.

"Colin immediately complied - my friend turned back towards me and said 'Okay, you can carry on Father'. I caught a glimpse of the black fury in his eyes and saw just what he might be capable of if rubbed up the wrong way." ●

JASON GREGORY