

WHEN CELL DOORS CLOSE AND HEARTS OPEN

Lysanne Sizoo

MIRACLES DO HAPPEN. Sweden is arguably one of Europe's most secularised countries, but miracles are happening here, in an environment where spirituality is often seen as the last item on the agenda. For the past three years, long-term inmates of Swedish prisons have been given the opportunity to follow a thirty-day Ignatian retreat. The project falls under the auspices of Nämnden för Andligt Vård, the body responsible for inmates' spiritual care. 'Three years ago, NAV contacted me about finding ways to introduce some quiet time into the lives of our long-term inmates', explained Leif Nilsberth, who is in charge of E Wing at Kumla high security prison near Örebro. 'We had noticed how the men benefited from time away from their noisy prison wings.' Father Truls, a Lutheran priest, had just returned from the UK. 'Having completed my first Jesuit thirty-day retreat', he said, 'I was inspired and looking for a new direction'. Then, out of the blue, he was invited to come and direct retreats at Kumla prison. There were many sceptics, and both guards and inmates laid bets on which of the retreatants would break the silence first. But three years on, the project has received permanent status; a 'monastery' has been established behind the prison walls; and the inmates are queuing up to take part.

When I visited Kumla Monastery for the first time, in 2003, I was emotionally and spiritually overwhelmed by the wholeness and the grace that radiated from the eyes of Kumla's 'Brothers'. Some forty inmates have now been through the programme, and it is certainly no 'soft option'. The prisoners give up their few privileges, such as television, radio and newspapers; and contact with the outside world via telephone calls and letters is traded for an undoubtedly painful and confrontational look inside. Father Truls explained that it is about throwing their masks away and building up their confidence:

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In prison you can't trust anyone, because they have a duty to report. But here they can be completely open, show the face behind the mask. The day they start writing down their so-called sins is a tough day. By then they've come to know all the good things that God has done for them. Here at the monastery I can put my arm around one of these men, even the most hardened, dangerous criminal, take his hand and say, 'I can really see you are having hell in your choices today, can I help?' So it is really hard and honest work, trying to find the truth about ourselves, and the important thing is that it is done in love.

The world's first prison monastery is located in an old industrial building within Kumla prison. It has eight meditation rooms furnished with icons on the wall and kneeling benches, eight cells, a kitchen and a chapel. Although the chapel contains nothing more than a semicircle of chairs with a small altar and a simple wood-carving resembling a crucifix, the atmosphere there is sacred. The full retreats, in which Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises are followed, are held twice a year. Interested inmates can come and try a short three-day retreat to help them make up their minds. Usually about twelve apply to join the programme, and Father Truls then chooses the final eight. I asked him whether he chose the inmates whom he thought were most likely to become good Christians. But Truls does not see the programme as a Christian conversion course:

We invite the men who seem to have the strongest longing to reach into themselves, or in the words of Ignatius, to conquer themselves. They know they have heavy baggage but they *are not* that baggage. Do they want to be Christians by the end? I don't care about that, because I am convinced that behind that longing is the Light of God.

He gave an example: 'One inmate could not accept it when I talked about God. So I asked him to replace "God" with "Love", and then it was okay. God is Love.' Truls reminded me that any form of authority, including God, might have become imbued with negative connotations for the prisoners; therefore he is always ready to find another way in if necessary.

Although the tools that Truls uses are of a traditional Christian nature, as are his own convictions, the experience of the men is truly

personal, and it need not be labelled as Christian in order to be valued by him:

My children taught me—and that was a great gift—to let them go and find their own spiritual and professional paths. It was difficult at first, but it taught me how to meet these men on open terms. Of course it's quite clear where I stand and where the monastery stands, but I feel strongly that it is my duty, my calling, to meet each person where they are, not where I want them to be.

Truls gave the example of Peter, who is a Buddhist:

The retreat has deepened his faith in his own way, and I gave him Anthony de Mello's readings to study. Remember, we have people here from all over the world, and our Swedish brand of Christianity is not always for them. ...

Peter used to say, 'don't talk so much about Jesus', and yet in the end he himself started to use his words and I teased him, 'be careful, Peter, just now Jesus is very close to you and you are very close to him'. Peter is still one of the most frequent visitors to the Monastery, using the meditation rooms and studying. The men find that they are whole in themselves. They learn from the inside out, unlike traditional church teaching, which is from the outside in. Ignatius said, 'Do not enslave the people by institutions and spiritual or religious laws'. This is what I believe.

So what do the men who have experienced the programme say? As the Brothers and I sat sipping our coffee and eating our Swedish buns, I realised that we were a group of like-minded souls discussing life from a spiritual as well as a personal perspective. At the same time, the screaming seagulls flying overhead were symbolic of the gulf that separated my daily life from theirs. Yet something also of the seagulls' freedom was reflected in the talk around the table. When I asked what the men had experienced, the most common response to my question was 'goodness', or 'the good in me'. 'Christianity is not really what this is all about', Stefan said, as he poured my coffee. 'It's been about finding myself, and building on that.'

I also asked the men about courage and forgiveness. 'In prison you're already at rock bottom, so joining the programme was not about courage for me', said Peter. 'My process of questioning started from my arrest.' I asked him how being a practising Buddhist had affected him on the retreat. 'I did sometimes feel a little lonely, even amongst my



retreat soul mates, but no one tried to change my convictions.' Kari, who is Finnish, said that for him the most challenging moment was when they were asked to write their confessions. 'I found that really hard, to see it there black on white.' The confessions were later offered at the altar and burned, while Truls spoke the formal words of forgiveness. I asked Andreas, who comes from Germany, how he experienced this. 'Forgiveness always follows, whatever

you have done, but you have to find forgiveness in yourself before you can forgive others.' As I looked into their eyes I could see that these men were truly speaking from the heart. When Andreas is released, and deported back to his native Germany, he intends to party just a little, and then to enter a monastery to help him make the transition back into real life. I asked him what he had missed most. 'Tenderness', he answered, without a hint of embarrassment.

It is interesting to note that there were few Swedes among the first batches of men that came through the programme. 'Those who come from other countries are more open', said Truls:

Sweden is a secular society and for the majority of Swedish people the idea of a monastery is neither positive nor negative, it's neutral. So is the word God. It has taken some years for Swedish inmates to listen to others talk about the retreat, and now they are becoming a little warmer. During one retreat we read the Bible in six different languages. However, this year the balance between Swedes and foreigners is levelling out.

So were the Brothers potential spiritual leaders for other inmates? Andreas, Peter and Kari laughed out loud at my suggestion, finding it hard to see themselves as guides for anyone, let alone for their fellow prisoners. 'I don't think so', replied Andreas, 'I am just the way I am now, and it's enough that I'm not going back into the old scene any more'. Francisco, now a deacon at his own prison in Österåker, said:

'you can't go back to playing the game. I would be denying my self, and I could never do that any more.' Imre, a small, quiet Hungarian, told me about the others' fear: 'I was attacked. Some of the men wanted to kill the new Spirit in me.' The radical change in these men has the potential to inspire, but also to provoke fear and anger in other inmates. 'It's hard. The guards know us by our crime and our sentence and we may have discovered that we are more, but others want us to remain as we were.' When I caught up with Francisco a year later, he told me that the mood has started to change. There is less suspicion on the wings, the guards are more positive, and other inmates now want to come to Kumla. His own work is now focused on facilitating spirituality with a group of men in his own prison, and on setting up a non-violence movement on the outside. On his one 'free' day a month he gives talks on the monastery experience.

Of course there are setbacks too: one participant left halfway through the retreat, and another was offered a 'deal' he couldn't refuse. Truls explained:

He was top dog, full of prison talk, and we'd had a very hard time, but at the end I found that there was something in him that was starting to grow. Nevertheless, he succumbed, and now has to serve another ten years. He is in our daily prayers, the other Brothers write to him, and there's always a candle burning for him in the chapel.

Now that Kumla Monastery is no longer an experimental project but a permanent institution, all prisons are obliged to tell their inmates about it, and so the demand for what it offers will grow. At the beginning, Truls did everything on his own, and sometimes found himself working 570 hours during a four-week retreat. Now that the project has received permanent status there will be more funds, allowing him to work together with another Lutheran priest.

Susanne Grimheden, Truls' new female counterpart, has experience of being in retreat herself:

It's about depriving yourself of impressions so that the inner can come to the fore. That is where I can meet my Self. And as a Christian I believe that deep inside ourselves lies the gift that tells us about the miracle that we are. It's a miracle; miracles happen here.



The Chapel at Kumla

And it seems that the highest (secular) authorities agree. Top-level visitors to Kumla have included the Prime Minister of Sweden, Göran Persson.

One look at the men who have shared their stories might tell *me* that the programme is a success; but the more established Kumla Monastery becomes, the greater the need to measure success in less personal terms. 'This is so very different from other programmes and you can't make a scientific study of what goes on at this mystical level', Father Truls said. Although the programme is not about prisoners getting an early release, the changes in behaviour that result from it may well count towards a reduced sentence. 'I got a call from a psychiatrist who reviewed an inmate following the retreat and didn't recognise his first diagnosis.' Truls told him:

Those who are in the deepest of themselves are a new creation. Unscientific though it was, that psychiatrist had to agree that something remarkable had happened. When you've been in hell for many years, don't think you can change that in thirty days. You can change the important thing—you can see the Light, and know that it's there. But it is still a long journey.

Lillemor Högerås works as a psychotherapist at the Hinzeberg female prison. As a psychotherapist and a pastor, she became interested in the work at Kumla Monastery and asked to make it the topic of a dissertation which she had to write. 'I was fascinated to find out about a project where they had a full thirty days as opposed to my weekly 45-minute sessions at Hinzeberg.' She interviewed inmates two days before their retreat, two days after, and then a few months later. Having just finished conducting the last interviews, she could only give her first preliminary impressions:

The men describe an inner calm, something within themselves that they can carefully, carefully continue working with. It's absolutely not a radical change, but a slow, slow processing, that describes new inner tools to meet the self, to recognise and break old patterns, and to slowly build more trust.

She described Father Truls as the classic 'transitional object' so often described in Object Relations theory. Another way to describe his role would be as an external unifying centre which can 'hold and mirror' the newly emerging centre in the men.

They care a lot about him, and show concern for his well-being. What is most noticeable is that their destructive side has not been removed, there's no denial, but it's integrated in a greater whole.

Although what happens at Kumla is close to a miracle, and is certainly infused with grace, it is important to remember that the steps being taken are tiny. Truls emphasized:

I think that it's a tough retreat, with a lot of rules and structures. It's afterwards that you start to grow, very slowly, doing small exercises and taking the small steps you have decided on. Therefore we need those separate areas in the prisons that will now become obligatory and to which the men return after the retreat and live in community. They will make food together, clean their own clothes, and make decisions about how to live their lives inside prison. We teach them that first you must care for yourself, then for the immediate community, and then for the outside world. They could support the Childhood Foundation, or Amnesty, or fight for peace, and support a joint project.

In other words, the men need to make their lives meaningful in a larger context, and to take responsibility for themselves and for others.

After my coffee with the inmates, I noticed how they walked freely in and out of the monastery building, carrying the cups back into the kitchen. Truls smiled as he watched them:

Normally the men would be either locked into the house, or into the exercise area. However, I wanted to make life at the monastery as natural as possible, and show them trust, building their sense of responsibility.

According to Leif Nilsberth, the small scale of the monastery means that it is possible to take more risks. 'The combination of more responsible men and the peaceful environment makes it work.'

Later, we selected some inspirational texts to make a book of readings for when the men are released. Our favourite was the one about an eagle's egg that is hatched amongst chickens. The eagle chick grows up thinking that he is a chicken, and never discovers his power. We all listened reflectively and smiled, knowing that we all have some of that chick inside us, that we are unaware of our eagle potential and perhaps even afraid of it. A leather-bound book at the back of the chapel showed more evidence of the insights that the men have gained, some profound, some more humorous. Tommy had just been hit by a ball in the eye. He said, 'Now perhaps I will learn to see life from the inside and not the outside'. Another text: 'I leave the monastery now to return and nourish that little bit of peace in my soul that I received during this time.' Stefan wrote, 'I have come a long way, and I have a long way left to go'. And, finally, Peter: 'there are many guides, but the goal is the same'. The miracle at Kumla continues.

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