

KUMLA PRISON MONASTERY

Taking the Next Step

Lysanne Sizoo

In 2004 Lysanne Sizoo wrote an article for The Way, 'When Cell Doors Close and Hearts Open', about an initiative enabling inmates in Swedish prisons to undertake a thirty-day Ignatian retreat. The success of this initiative has led to the next step: the opportunity for prisoners to live in a religious community, with the establishment of a monastic house at Skänninge prison in the south of Sweden. Lysanne now visits both Skänninge and a proposed new half-way house to be run by the Bridgettine sisters at nearby Vadstena.

The Story Begins at Kumla

In 2001 Father Truls Bernhold held the first thirty-day Ignatian retreats at Kumla high-security prison. After a career spanning 25 years as a Lutheran parish priest he had attended his own thirty-day retreat at Loyola Hall in the UK and was looking for a new challenge. He was invited by the director of E Wing at Kumla prison, Leif Nilsberth, to come and hold meditation retreats for prisoners serving long-term and life sentences. Nilsberth had found that inmates became calmer and the atmosphere on the wings improved after previous meditation projects. The first retreats were held on a dedicated prison wing with a small group of participants from jails all over Sweden; but it became clear that a proper meditation centre was needed, away from the hustle and bustle of the rest of the prison population. Truls persuaded the Swedish government to spend just over £150,000 on turning a disused building in the Kumla prison grounds into the world's first prison monastery and retreat centre, with room for eight participants.

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The goal of the prison retreat is formulated as ‘triumphing over the self and choosing a life free of unhealthy desires and behaviours’. What started as an experiment soon became a success story, and today Kumla prison monastery hosts retreats of various lengths for male and, since 2007, female inmates from all over Sweden. To date some 150 (mainly male) prisoners have undergone the full retreat, while just over 200 have been on the shorter ‘trying out’ retreats. While initially only the bravest volunteered, word has spread and there is now a waiting list.

However, Truls recognised there was yet another step to take. He retired from directing the prison monastery project in 2008, handing over to his colleague Boel-Maria Lennartsdotter. But he immediately began lobbying for a monastic house within the prison grounds—a place where prisoners could live in community. ‘Once the participants discover who they are in Truth, and having understood their True Nature, they choose a new life, and search for ways to implement it.’ It soon became clear that the life-changing experience of finding ‘an inner light’ where previously they had only seen darkness clashed with the kind of daily life that the men experienced back in their home prisons after the retreat. While internally they felt reformed, externally they were still treated primarily as the perpetrators of the crimes for which they were being punished.

A new religious brotherhood developed from one of the earliest retreats, called the Christian Brotherhood of Saint Andrew. Five of the participants requested to be placed together at Österåker jail so that it would be easier to keep the new inner spirit alive. They supported one another in resisting the temptations of drugs and criminality within the prison. But it was not easy, and at one point it seemed as though the group had lost one of their number to the prison community. Truls comments, however:

... the ‘lost’ brother is not at all lost. Once you become one of the brothers you remain so, whatever happens, as long as you want it yourself. We supported him, and now, for the past years he has been very active as a host at Kumla retreats and I am just planning for him to come to Skänninge.

Despite his retirement, Truls continued working enthusiastically for the Kumla brothers, and in December 2008 St Ingrid’s Monastic House was inaugurated within the grounds of the newly renovated



Skänninge prison

Skänninge prison. Once again, the Swedish Prison and Probation service provided funding; a set of existing barracks was converted into living quarters, and a chapel and monastery garden were built. Between 7:45 in the morning and 7:45 at night the men have the freedom to come and go around the grounds of the house, while prison fences cordon off the both the outside world and the rest of the prison.

Creating a New Community

‘What strikes us when we have visitors is that everyone thinks we’re so special.’ Niklas is leading the conversation as we sip coffee in the communal living room. ‘But we just see this as our daily life, we don’t know any better.’ As I try to rein in my gushing enthusiasm, I take in the simple but comfortable living room, with its television and bookshelves, and the six men who are gathered on an assortment of chairs and sofas. Upon arrival I was delighted to meet Kari again, as well as Peter, whose experience of the retreat led him to deepen his study of Buddhism. The second Peter, ‘Pete’, sits on my right next to Christer, who was the first resident here at St Ingrid’s. Truls is the sixth man in the room, beaming like a proud father. They explain why this permanent spiritual home was so necessary. Niklas says:

You feel you have become different inside and you want to live according to this new sense that you have about yourself and others and that becomes very hard while you’re still living on regular prison corridors.

I ask him to explain further, remembering that some of the brothers were beaten up upon their return to their home prisons. Christer and Peter explain how the general atmosphere in a prison remains criminal. There are drugs and violence, cursing and profanity, and a general lack of goodwill. People know you as what you were and not as what you have become. While none of the brothers would claim that they were overnight saints, they craved peace and quiet to develop greater inner strength and resourcefulness. One after the other they applied to come and live at St Ingrid's, and the first of the three houses on site is now fully inhabited. The other two houses, each offering a place to a further six men, will be filled over the coming year.

Peter says:

The first weeks here weren't even really about deepening my experience of the thirty-day retreat but about learning to live in a community where everyone strives towards the goal of living life in a better, more positive, way. It has been a resocialising experience, living in a small tight-knit group.

For years the men had become used to being locked in their individual cells from early evening until early morning, with the television the only form of company. Pete adds,

... and so it was difficult in the beginning to negotiate the sharing of a common space, negotiating what programmes to watch on television, as well as all the other aspects of living together in a community that has to develop its own rules rather than follow the rigid social rules of ordinary prison life.

It is difficult for someone such as me, who has never experienced the infantilising effect of prison life, to understand how important it is to be free to decide when to go to your bedroom and shut the door, to get up and make a sandwich in the middle of the night, or go to the chapel and pray. The outer doors of the building are locked at 7:45 p.m., but the brothers move around freely inside, and this greater freedom demands greater responsibility. Being entrusted with that responsibility is part of what continues to make them grow, and what makes them so fiercely protective of the Kumla project and their role as pioneers. But despite all that, for them this is also about getting on with their daily life (as Niklas reminded me earlier), with household

chores needing to be shared and negotiated, a hot potato in many households, not just this one!

This first group to form the community at St Ingrid's is also well aware of its responsibility in creating something that others can later join in and follow. A joint letter inviting other veterans of the thirty-day retreat to apply for a place at St Ingrid's says:

We are working hard to make our stay here a good preparation for a life after release. That demands a committed loyalty towards ourselves, our brothers, and towards the work of the prison service. Each brother is expected to work actively on his own personal development. It is our experience that this happens best through sharing your experiences with the brothers and also listening to each other.

Problems are no longer taken back to the cells, pushed to the back of the mind, or dealt with violently, but are brought into the open, 'and not always willingly', smiles Kari. Accepting such mutual support in meeting personal challenges is another new experience. 'We have to be able to talk about what's going on between us here', agrees Niklas, 'and it's not always easy to show yourself vulnerable when you've had to protect yourself for so many years'. Through all of this, Truls is there to help support and guide the brothers in building the dynamics of their community, sometimes as a stern father and most often as a good friend.

Daily Routines

The brothers have been given a lot of individual and group freedom in establishing the routines at the monastery villa, but the daily routine of canonical hours and meditation was agreed upon in advance, as well as their contribution to prison life. They get up and attend their first service of the day at 7:30 a.m., which means being up and about in the house and chapel before the outer door is unlocked. Midday prayers are held at 11:30, and evening prayers follow at 8:00 p.m., after lockup. The brothers have a trusted position in the prison community since they carry out food and laundry deliveries. In addition, Peter and Niklas are both studying for MAs, and others follow courses in navigation, painting and tending the monastery garden.

How have the other inmates at Skänninge, many of whom are in different treatment models of their own, reacted to this influx of brothers from Kumla? Christer explains:

Some feel we have taken their jobs, and were not happy to see us here at all. Also, we live quite apart from the rest of the prison community and so there are some who think we're a little weird. But during study hours and while we go about our tasks, some have also expressed an interest and want to know more about the retreats at Kumla.

However, while most of the prison staff were positive and open in the beginning, Christer feels they have become less helpful lately. 'The more pride we seem to experience in ourselves and in creating a meaningful existence, the more some of them want to keep us down.'

A few months ago Christer took part in a national radio programme, and on our outing to Vadstena we ran in to the priest who had interviewed him. 'Did you like the show?' he asked Christer, who explained that he had still not heard it. As it turned out, the tapes that were left for him at the prison front desk directly after the recording seemed to have mysteriously disappeared. Truls was both livid and disappointed to hear this; but, tough as they are, such small incidents challenge the men to raise above petty slights and show their commitment to their way of life. Being confronted at every turn with the unequal power balance that prison life necessitates, the men need to remind themselves of the greater power to which they are witnesses. Niklas said, with no small measure of pride:

I received a letter from a young guy who had just been sentenced and who wanted to know how I had managed to get where I am today. It felt so fulfilling to be able to reply to him, from a realistic place, about keeping out of trouble, and doing what he needs to do to apply to take part in a retreat, and offering myself and the other brothers as a point of contact.

So, between getting on with daily life as best they can and being ambassadors for the Kumla/Skänninge project, a lot of responsibility rests on the shoulders of these six men. Since they seem to embrace it with such alacrity, I wonder why, if the resources were to be made available, it should not be possible for every inmate in Sweden to participate in an Ignatian retreat programme. 'But not everyone is

ready for it', replies Niklas pragmatically, 'I certainly would not have been able to do this myself just a couple of years ago'. And Christer adds:

Of course it would be great if everyone could be offered the opportunity, and to some degree they are, but not everyone is ready for it, and perhaps it is better to see the Kumla/Skänninge project as one of many different programmes offered within the prison world, and be glad for the fact that it exists.

Many Paths to God

I notice a little Buddha sitting in the corner of the living room, as well as traditional Christian artefacts. The book shelves are full of literature covering both Western and Eastern religious texts. I ask the brothers how they organize their services and what spiritual traditions they choose to draw on.

We tried different ways, using set texts that all the brothers use that have completed the long retreat, as well as poetry, or chosen Bible readings, but in the end we settled for the readings from the liturgical calendar and we do this as rotational singing so we are all taking part.

One of the earlier criticisms of the retreat was its overt Christian character, and on my last visit I had asked Truls how he meets this concern. He said:

In Christian teaching knowledge is offered from the outside in. During the retreats the teaching comes from within. I merely facilitate in an environment that enables the men to concentrate on their inner dialogue, and the Holy Spirit does the rest.

One of the thirty-day participants in recent years was from the Islamic faith, and both Niklas and Peter have deepened their interest in Buddhism. They feel that there is a tolerance and an openness to the many different interpretations of the inner Truth.

Although we now stick to reading predominantly Christian liturgy during our meetings, I know that under the words there is a common spiritual message and it is possible for me to hear the teachings of Buddha in the texts.

Niklas adds that he also finds that he uses the texts as starting-points for thinking about the way different religions try to reflect the same deeper Truth, and he has not yet decided whether, once he has left the prison system altogether, he would like to deepen his spiritual life in a Dominican setting or in a Buddhist setting.

At the end of the day we make our way to St Ingrid's Chapel, adjoining the house, for vespers. The chapel is built in the round and an icon of Saint Ingrid constitutes the focal point behind the altar. 'Why St Ingrid?' I ask Truls later as he walks me back to my hotel. 'Ingrid Elovsson, who died in 1282, was the founder of a female Dominican cloister more or less on the same grounds where the prison and the monastic house now stand.' While we wait for the outer door to be unlocked so that I can leave, we discuss the programme for the next day. For the first time the men have been given leave as a group to visit the emerging half-way house at Vadstena. Truls grumbles about the men having to leave mobile phones at home, seeing even this small security measure as an insult to the men's integrity. All are surprised that I have never been to Vadstena, one of Sweden's most historic towns, and home to the Sisters of the Bridgettine order.

Insiders on the Outside

When I arrive the next morning the men are excited and impatient to get away. Sitting between Kari and Peter in the minibus, I reflect on the intensity of the silence as one by one they quieten during the first ten minutes of the drive. They have all been on leave before, though never as a group, but I imagine I sense them savouring the moment as the prison slowly disappears from sight.

It is in this transitional moment between being 'men on the inside' and 'men on their way to the outside' that the photographs of their children come out to be shown. Paternal pride is mixed with the heartbreaking truth that they have acted in such a way as to lose the freedom to father their children as they would wish. And yet their experience of retreat has affected their relations with family and friends in new and positive ways. Peter describes 'new meetings, of mutuality and equality'. And it is a new experience for them to be the person who can offer emotional, and sometimes spiritual, support to relatives and friends, rather than the person who causes pain. There



Insiders on the outside at Vadstena

can be no greater lesson to teach our children than how to accept our own failure and to use the challenge of its pain to grow and learn.

Gradually a lighter mood returns to the minibus as we arrive at the main square in Vadstena; a journalist, a priest, a guard and five inmates, but we could easily be taken for a group of tourists venturing out into one of Sweden's most historic places. Niklas and Kari disappear from view to check out sunglasses and T-shirts while the others joke that this would be the ideal time to make a run for it. Yet in reality they carefully watch one another, carrying the joint responsibility of the trust that has been placed in them. From the moment they completed their silent retreat the brothers' expectations of themselves, and Truls's expectations of them, became more positive; gradually they also won the trust of the prison system. And it is this trust, this responsibility for being proved right, that makes the outing to Vadstena as relaxed and easy as it is, even for Leif, who calls them an 'exceptional group, and this outing an exceptional experience within the prison system'.

The group moves on to the small pilgrims' guest house in the grounds next to the cathedral. The guest house is one of many along a route that includes both Cistercian and Dominican monasteries. There a rigorous spring-clean is taking place and, although Swedish coffee and buns are immediately brought out to our little gathering, Truls



volunteers the men's services for shaking out carpets and mats. Afterwards we make our way to Vadstena Cathedral for midday prayers. I walk with Christer, who has become a bit of a local hero since his radio show led to a series of talks about the project at Skänninge. He is constantly being greeted as we walk, and I realise the wisdom of situating the half-way house in a community that so closely resembles the one that the Kumla brothers are trying to create within the prison walls. The experience of the Ignatian retreats has given these men an identity that allows them to connect with people on the outside who share it. When they are released, they know that there will be somewhere where they fit in. This is not as soft and cosy as it may sound: the rigours and disciplines of monastic life are brought home to us by the hard-working nuns of the Bridgettine order a little later in the day!

After prayers we share lunch with the Bridgettine Sisters and a delegation of religious and social workers who have just completed a five-day workshop on bringing their skills to prison life. I sit with Christer, a lay priest and a prison worker from the north of Sweden who pounces on him with very direct questions. What is it like being an inmate with children, and what do you do when your wife no longer wants to be in contact? I feel this is far too close to the bone and long to ask her to back off and let the man enjoy his lunch. Afterwards I ask

him whether I was being over-sensitive. He agrees that some people can make the prisoners feel like a sideshow; but he also embraces the opportunity to explain something about prison life, and about which approaches to spiritual guidance have been helpful and which have not.

When lunch is over, Truls leads us away from the main house into a residential area where three small cottages encircle an inner garden. These are the houses that have been given on loan by the Bridgettine sisters to Skänninge prison, and that are destined to become the first half-way house for the Kumla Brothers. The Swedish charity Stadsmissionen, which has plenty of experience of running half-way houses, will take care of the actual day-to-day business. As we are shown around the buildings, ducking our heads for the odd beam here and there, our guide, Maria, tells us where the common rooms, the bedrooms and the other areas are planned to be. When she points out the house where the Stadsmission staff will live, Truls immediately expresses a concern that they will not be living as part of the community but coming in and out, working shifts and keeping a distance. They will be hearing from him, no doubt.

Suddenly there is a noise of car horns and people shouting. A largish van is trying to back into the small driveway between two of the houses and two sisters are guiding it in with exclamations of 'left!', 'right!' and 'stop!' The brothers rush forward to help the sisters unload tables, chairs, desks and piles of flat-packs—the material stuff of new lives built on hope. Their joy and energy are touching to see. Niklas, who will be the first resident here if all goes well, steps back for a moment. I ask him how he feels, and he replies: 'This makes me feel so much safer about the future, seeing this, knowing it is here that I can come to and take what is also my next step. It feels quite amazing, quite wonderful.'

Of course, a lot of work needs to be done on these houses before they can be permanently inhabited, and the sisters are quick to note the different skills that the men have to offer—carpentry and floor-laying, computer skills and even window-cleaning. As always, Truls immediately capitalises on the situation. He asks the nuns to write to the prison services at Skänninge requesting that the men receive extra leave to come and help prepare what will, for some sooner than others, become their next home.

A quiet underlying sense of joy and hope fills the minibus on our journey back to Skänninge. As one of the brothers succinctly puts it:

I have behaved in a way that led to me losing my freedom. But I have found a new inner freedom. And I am, because of the monastic house in Skänninge, able to deepen that inner freedom, and grow stronger in myself. And so although it is sad to be returning to prison after a day such as this, while I serve out my time, it is the best and most inspiring place to serve it.

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