

# Ray McGovern to Gov. Brown on Prisons

In recent weeks, prisoners in California's over-crowded prison system have been on hunger strikes demanding more humane treatment. This crisis has prompted Jesuit-schooled, former CIA analyst Ray McGovern to write an open letter an appeal for justice to California Gov. Jerry Brown, who also received Jesuit training.

By Ray McGovern

July 22, 2011

Dear Gov. Brown,

I'm thinking that the Jesuits who educated you probably told you, as they did me, that Ignatius of Loyola required all Jesuits, including the highly educated ones, to empty bedpans at local hospitals and prisons on a regular basis.

The current crisis in California prisons brings this to mind and prompts my appeal to you to remember what you and I learned in high school and college in the Fifties. A huge opportunity has been dropped on your doorstep to bring Justice for those in prison.

Ignatius wanted to ensure that his followers in the Society of Jesus would not forsake the society of ordinary, often marginalized, folks like the ones Jesus of Nazareth hung out with.

Ignatius, you may remember, was all too familiar with the kind of suffering and oppression in hospitals and prisons. The bedpan requirement was his way of warning his followers not to trade Jesus's preferential option for the poor for the allure of ivory towers, or for governors' mansions, for that matter.

Let me fast-forward to one of Ignatius's more recent successors, Hans-Peter Kolvenbach, S.J., who led the Society from 1983 to 2008. Like so many Jesuits Kolvenbach was over-educated in the Academy. By the time he became Superior General, though, he had gotten Jesus's main thrust exactly right, saying this:

"Personal involvement with the injustice others suffer is the catalyst for solidarity. This, then, gives rise to intellectual inquiry and moral reflection."

And so did Ignacio Ellacuria, S.J., get it right. Speaking last November on the 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the murder of his six Jesuit colleagues in San Salvador, their housekeeper and her daughter, Ellacuria warned:

"Cuando la situaci3n hist3rica se define en t3rminos de injusticia y opresi3n, no hay amor cristiano sin lucha por la justicia." ["When the historical situation is defined in terms of injustice and oppression, there is no Christian love without a fight for justice."]

Very much in the same tradition is Dean Brackley, S.J., who was a professor at my alma mater, Fordham University, and also a community organizer in my native Bronx. Dean left immediately for El Salvador to replace one of the slain Jesuits, and has been there ever since. Before he left, Dean put his theology in language we Bronxites could readily grasp:

"It all depends on who you think God is, and how God feels when little people get pushed

around.”

Governor Brown, I believe I know “where you’re coming from,” as folks say these days. At Fordham Prep and College during the 1950s in the Bronx, I experienced the best of the *Ratio Studiorum* and the college curricula the Jesuits had to offer. You had a similar, if not identical, experience in high school and college in California.

But nothing is perfect. I’ve since become aware of one earlier misunderstanding. In Moral Theology we were taught that the basic thing to remember was the mandate to “Do good and avoid evil.”

Taking refresher courses in theology at Georgetown several years ago, I learned that this formula is only half-right. We are not called to avoid evil; we are called to confront it, in the prison system, and anywhere else injustice reigns.

Again, I think I know where you’re coming from, but I cannot say I know where you’re going. It’s hard to see you now in the same frame with bedpans, the ones at Pelican Bay, for example. This may be metaphor, but it is, I would suggest, a telling one. And I would urge you to reflect on it.

Are you afraid that, if you rise to Kolvenbach’s invitation to “personal involvement with the injustice others suffer,” this might leave you no option but to act prophetically, and take the political flak? Please don’t get tied up in political knots. I’m guessing you still believe that the eventual reward for a prophetic stance will be out of this world, so to speak.

I guess what I am really asking you is to go back to your roots. Pay heed not only to the example of Jesuits like Kolvenbach, Ellacuria and Brackley, but also to Bishop Oscar Romero, who so often repeated to the oppressed Salvadoran people what Jesus repeated with similar frequency: “Don’t be afraid.” Romero was quite specific in his challenge:

“Hay cristiano hoy en dia significa no temer, no callar por miedo.” [“To be a Christian today means not being afraid, not silenced by fear.”]

Silence, inaction are not options for followers of Jesus and Ignatius, both of whom mandated preferential concern and care for the marginalized, prisoners, for example.

You are in a unique position to do Justice. Do it, Jerry, *ad majorem Dei gloriam, AMDG*, the emblematic Jesuit motto.

In Truth, Justice, and (then) Peace,

Ray McGovern

Tell the Word

The Ecumenical Church of the Saviour

Washington, DC

---