

Book review: Prisons... Manila Pen and Beyond

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The Prison Journal of Fr Roberto P Reyes includes narrations and reflections of his fellow detainees. Published by the Asian Human Rights Commission. Printed in the Philippines. 127 pages.

Many, many years ago as a pupil in an Irish village school, one of our textbooks was a prison journal by a famous Irish patriot. It was a gripping tale which we read with the greatest of interest. This was my first encounter with prison literature. More recently I read Bishop Domingo Tang's, "How Inscrutable His Ways", another gripping story told in very simple, direct language. Still more recently I accidentally came across a book by Rita Nightingale, an English girl who was wrongly imprisoned in a Bangkok jail for allegedly being in possession of drugs. Originally a less than enthusiastic Christian, Rita, while in prison, became a very highly committed Christian, and could cry out, "I thank the Lord for bringing me to this prison". Her book is entitled, "Free, True Release in Christ in a Bangkok jail". Rita was eventually released and returned to England, where she worked directly for the welfare of prisoners.

So it was with considerable anticipation I approached Fr Roberto's journal, and let me assure you dear reader, I was not disappointed. Fr Roberto was accidentally associated with the attempted Manila coup on November 29, 2007. He was arrested, spent 15 days in jail, and was subsequently discharged.

In his journal he describes his experiences day by day. Physically it was a rather relaxed regime. He was able to celebrate Mass each day, practice yoga, and undertake his daily run in the company of a fellow prisoner, talk with visitors and sympathisers (of whom there were many!). One of his major irritants was the very noisy conversation of his prison guards at night when he was trying to sleep. Nonetheless it was prison, he was behind prison bars, and was deprived of his freedom. At the same time I was reading another prison memoir, this time by a man who had spent some months in a Nepalese prison. His journal is entitled, "258 Dark Days", and I can assure you, dear reader, they were dark, very dark days! The prisoners were blindfolded, not allowed to converse with one another. And torture was frequent. Yes, there was a world of difference between the Nepalese and Manila prisons. But let us not forget--both were prisons.

Fr Roberto's reflections on his prison experience are of considerable interest; in my opinion, the most interesting part of the book. He describes prison as an opportunity to "revisit another prison, the prison inside each one of us". He also speaks about the prison "out there", the unfriendly structures often built into the life of many organizations, and which inhibit progressive action. Fr Roberto describes his own prison experience as helping him to grow in his "priestly commitment and identity". He goes on to say that it was "an investment with immeasurable returns". And he sums it all up with that astounding phrase, "prison is peace". Each year a priest is obliged to make a retreat of 4-5 days. I have no doubt that Fr Roberto's 15 days inside this Manila prison was a very fruitful, if highly unconventional, retreat!

At one point in his reflections Fr Roberto raises the question of "God's name for me?". He is often referred to as "the Running Priest". I humbly suggest he be called 'prophet'. He is one of the prophets of our time. We are gradually rediscovering the prophet and his role. One author has described the prophet as the person who "comforts the disturbed and disturbs the comfortable". This description aptly describes that Old Testament prophet Amos, and many of our more contemporary prophets, Archbishop Romero, Father Dan Berrigan SJ. The mission of the prophet is most certainly not an easy one. He sometimes has to endure suffering, negative criticisms, misunderstandings, and even prison. In saying all this we must also accept the fact that the prophet is also human, fallible, and most assuredly has no prior claim on perfection. But undoubtedly we need the prophet. And Fr Roberto is one of them.

A few minor criticisms of this journal:

There is an abundance of photos, but no indication of where the photo was taken, or who the people in the photo are.

There are also some Tagalog extracts. However there is no accompanying translation or, at least, a short English summary, for the benefit of the non-Philippine reader.

There are also some occasional misprints.

A second edition will correct these minor imperfections.

But, overall, Fr Roberto's journal is undoubtedly gripping, very well worth reading, and will leave the reader with much to reflect on.

Congratulations, Father Roberto.