

“F” - The Scarlet Letter (Part I) (Fr. Stephen Powley)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



John was 20 years old when the judge told him that he would spend the next 5 years in prison as a result of the felony for which he had just been convicted. From that day forward, John was branded a FELON. Though the “F” was not physically branded on his forehead, he knew it was there and his family knew it was there. His life would never be the same nor would his family’s life for they seemed to carry the same “F” with them.



John came from a great family who were all very active in their Orthodox Church. John had served in the altar until he was 16. He was a good boy who had made a couple of horrible decisions while away at college.

The only thing good the family could find in this entire nightmare was that John went to school out of state. The other members of the Church didn't know about John's crime or of his conviction; just the family and a few very, very close friends, who were sworn to secrecy. Oh, they did tell their priest and he said he would pray for John, but he didn't think it would do any good to go visit him. He promised total confidentiality. After all, this was too shameful for anyone else to know about.

If members of the parish council found out, the family felt certain the mother would be asked to step down. If their Church found out, they were sure they would have to quit coming to Divine Liturgy. If others found out, they would gossip. After all, what would people think of the "F" that branded their family; it was too very shameful to even imagine. The family would simply say that John was taking some time off school to travel and work abroad. No shame in that. This was a secret that the family must maintain; after all, they were such a fine upstanding family.

So it was that John went off to prison with no one to really help him. Emotionally and spiritually he was abandoned. He felt that he no longer was loved by either his family or his Church. As all students of psychology know from the very basics of Maslow's Hierarchy Of Needs, every person needs to "belong" and it was no different for John. If he no longer belonged in his family or Church, then he would

find some other group in which he could be accepted. The gangs within prisons are looking for just that kind of young man. They would gladly take John under their wing and be there for him.

Over my years of being a prison chaplain and now in my work with Orthodox Christian Prison Ministry, I can assure you that this is a very real scenario.

This situation or something so very similar happens more often than you can possibly imagine. Orthodox men and women find themselves in prison with no one to support them emotionally or spiritually. Their family and their Church have abandoned them.

I was once at a prison in a large city and was told that a man from the Orthodox Faith would like to see me if possible. He had been in that prison for over one year. There was a large Orthodox Church just a few blocks from that prison. He had written the Church and the priest several times and even had people on the outside call the Church. No one ever answered his letters or returned those phone calls.

If ever there was a time when a person needs their family and their Church to stand with them, it is in the midst of having to serve a prison sentence. That person needs to know that their family and their Church still loves them and will be there for them.

Many years ago, it was rare that you would actually know someone who was in prison. Today, the United States has the highest incarceration rate of any country in the world. Yes, we are number one in that sad category. According to the statistics of the International Centre for Prison Studies (ICPS) from December of 2011, the USA had an incarceration rate of 730 people per 100k population. The odds have greatly increased that each of you readers likely knows someone who either is or has been in prison. In case you are wondering about the incarceration rate for some other countries: Mexico-201; Turkey-168; Lebanon-122; China-121; Greece-111. That really puts the 730 for the USA in perspective. You can see all the countries at: http://www.prisonstudies.org/info/worldbrief/wpb_stats.php?area=all&category=wb_po prate

Part of the reason our incarceration rate is so very high is that a majority of people return to prison within 3-5 years after they are released. Often times, these are the very people that were abandoned by their family and by their Church when they first went into prison. If that rate of incarceration is to come down, then we need to

embrace our Orthodox brothers and sisters who find they are going to prison.

As I speak at Orthodox Churches and gatherings around this country, inevitably someone will come up to me afterward and tell me about a loved one in prison. Far too often it is said with a whisper and a look of shame. That shame is often nothing more than our own foolish pride. That “perfect, fine, upstanding” family has a blemish. Unless every member of your family can walk on water, I would suggest to you that no family is perfect. What makes the family truly wonderful is an unconditional love for each other. The key word is unconditional. We continue to love and support each other no matter what.

As for the Church, do you really truly believe that your Church family is going to abandon you because your family member is heading to prison? If it were someone else and you found out, would you abandon them or would you be there to help them? A felon in the family is not the source of the proverbial “Scarlet Letter” that gets branded on our foreheads. Rather, it should be the source of an outpouring of love from our spiritual brothers and sisters in Christ. We as Orthodox need to love each other in that same manner as a family should love each other: Unconditionally.

If someone you love is heading for prison or is already in prison, tell your priest. Ask him for his spiritual help. Don’t be afraid to ask others for prayer. Please do contact Orthodox Christian Prison Ministry. Your loved one can receive an Orthodox Study Bible, an Orthodox Prayer Book, Icons, correspondence courses, devotional books, newsletters, and they can even begin writing an Orthodox person for spiritual support and guidance. If at all possible, OCPM will help find an Orthodox priest near that prison to visit your loved one. Almost every one of the priests we have contacted has been excited and willing to get involved with a ministry to someone in prison.

I know a man who was very much like this made up John. He had been an altar boy and later found himself very much a part of the violence of prison life. By God’s great mercy, he was brought back into the Orthodox Faith, back into a good relationship with his family, and back into a good relationship with his Church. When he left prison, all of them were there for him and it made all the difference in his life. Perhaps God is calling you to make a difference in the life of a person in prison. Please contact OCPM as to how you might get involved. Together we can help erase the “F” from their foreheads.

“I WAS IN PRISON AND YOU CAME TO VISIT ME”

(Matthew 25:36)

This article was written for Orthodox Christian Prison Ministry (Post Office Box 468 Fleetwood, PA 19522-0468) and is posted here with permission. Fr. Stephen a priest of the Antiochian Archdiocese of North America and serves as the Proistamenos at St. John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church in Pueblo, CO. He also serves as the Assistant Director for Orthodox Christian Prison Ministry. Fr. Stephen served as a Prison Chaplain for almost 26 years before retiring in August of 2010.