

Northwest Review

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REV. A. A. CHERRIER,

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF.

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SATURDAY, FEB. 20, 1904.

Calendar for Next Week.

FEBRUARY.

- 21—First Sunday in Lent.
- 22—Monday—The chair of St. Peter at Antioch.
- 23—Tuesday—St. Peter Damian, Bishop, Doctor.
- 24—Wednesday—Ember Day and Vigil. Votive office of St. Joseph.
- 25—Thursday—St. Mathias. Apostle.
- 26—Friday—The Lance and the Nails. Ember Day.
- 27—Saturday—St. Margaret of Cortona, Penitent. Ember Day.

DISCHARGED PRISONERS

The Rev. Aloysius M. Fish, a Capuchin Father, Chairman of the Committee on Discharged Prisoners, of the National Prison Association of New Jersey, writes to us the following letter, which has been crowded out until now.

Trenton, N.J., Jan. 11, 1904
Editor of the Northwest Review,
Winnipeg Manitoba.

Dear Sir:—I herewith forward you a duplicate of an article copies of which I am sending to the religious press throughout the United States and Canada, in an endeavor to secure for it as wide publicity as possible. My chief desire is to bring my views before, and to invite as much discussion as I can from the added audience which your publication will assure. Therefore, I trust you can find space for it in one of your forthcoming issues.

The "Northwest Review," circulating as it does through all grades of society, reaches many Catholic business men and employers especially, to whom my views and the facts stated will be of more than passing interest, for, you know, the ultimate fate of the discharged prisoner rests mostly in the hands of employers.

The publishing rights of this article have not been sold, and as I will not send any other paper in your immediate vicinity a copy, I can assure you of the exclusive right to publish it in your own territory.

Trusting you can grant the co-operation I seek, and thanking you in advance for the consideration asked, believe me,

Very sincerely yours,
(REV.) ALOYS M. FISH.

Although we have not enough space for the entire article, we gladly print extracts from it which apply to this country as well as to the United States.

Amos W. Butler, of Indiana, at the National Prison Congress, 1902 said:

"What a great number of convicts altogether there is turned loose in our country! In few states are there organizations to help them; few of them are given the help of a friend; most of them have no one really interested in their welfare. This is a great problem for the solution of which this association stands. It has labored with some effect to bring this cause to the attention of Christian people and to that end will continue to work."

I underline the concluding words of the preceding passage, for it

gives the cue to my present effort and it emphasizes the continuity and the perseverance of the National Prison Association in its work towards the betterment of prisoners and of prisons. I shall not pretend originality or novelty in what I propose saying; all I lay claim to will be the endeavor to keep up the old interest and to arouse more and renewed interest in the discharged prisoner. To attain results we must "keep at it." I desire to awaken deep thought and thorough discussion, and to this end I shall, disconnectedly, perhaps, still to the point propose some topics and express thereon some ideas.

IMPORTANCE OF THIS STUDY.

The end to be attained by imprisonment is not alone the atonement for the transgression, but also the reformation of the transgressor. But reformation in prison without readaptation to society upon release is a house built on sand—it has not stability. Hence the opinion has grown strong in me that the treatment of the convict after his discharge is one of the most important matters in the science of penology.

The experience of prison workers is that usually in the criminal, amid his unruly instincts, there is a great, though undeveloped amount of good. True it is that some criminals are found who are yet unripe for moral development or remoulding, but on the whole, moral and religious work among convicts, while they are in prison, is not one of the most difficult tasks. Earnest, prudent and unselfish moral ministrations are not rejected by them, and zeal, tempered by good sense, has worked wonderful results. It is relatively easy to bring about in the convicts some change for the better, but the crucial point, the point that determines perseverance or failure, is met soon after the convicts have again passed beyond the prison door. As chaplain I endeavor to build up in them character and morality, to train them in confidence in the helping grace of God. But as they pass from under my influence, a feeling of apprehensiveness steals over me—a dread that the beautiful edifice I have been in them abuilding will not withstand the shock of coldness and aversion, of hardships and persecutions that they are likely to meet. There is a percentage of men in prison and discharged from our prisons that have become infatuated with a life of crime, they find in it exhilaration and perverted exercise of their abilities; they are criminals for crime's sake. It is their proclivity and livelihood. They despise society and regard it as their lawful prey. They seek no readaptation. Why are they so? The cause of this does not in all cases and to the entire extent lie in inheritance or environment while young, though without doubt much of it can be traced to these sources. In the past, perhaps long ago, when they would have been pliable to good, when they were willing and open to reformation, the mark of notoriety was placed on them by society's agents and guardians, they were cast out friendless, no helping hand was turned to aid them. Now they seek no more sympathy, they are sour and disheartened, their hands are against all, and the hands of all are against them. Close contact with criminals while in prison, reveals many of the habitual and recidivist class, whose past has been one of discouragement and whose future is a mass of darkness. They respond feebly or not at all to the call for reformation; they have left hope behind. It is greatly their own fault, but have not their fellowmen, who first treat them unreasonably, uncharitably, and unjustly, and then persecute them as recidivists, a goodly share in the existence of this class that is in truth a blot on our social conditions. How many that at first were criminals by accident have been thus driven into becoming criminals by design.

THE DISCHARGED PRISONER.

The man just discharged from prison has received from the State a new though distinctive suit of clothes, five, exceptionally ten, very rarely twenty-five dollars, and sometimes a railroad ticket. In eight states the man may have

earnings to his credit. The most usual outfit in twenty-five States and Territories is not above the suit, five dollars and railroad fare. Four States give practically nothing. The man looks ahead to his future. If he goes back to his former home, his acquaintances will likely distrust him; in case he has acquired some notoriety, he will be held under a general suspicion. Provided, however, that he has father, mother or wife to welcome him, his lot is not unbearable, and he can rehabilitate himself, living down the disgrace of having been a convict.

But, perhaps, he has no home, or is made unwelcome by his own, or fears molestations—then he must go to a strange place. To live up to his good resolves that he presumably formed in prison, he must work. Can he get work? If he has a trade or profession, he must furnish references; if the industrial establishments have been unionized, his self-respect forbids him to work except under union auspices, and this mostly he cannot do; he must pay his board; he needs a change of clothing and likely some tools—to do all this he has a five dollar note.

If he can find no work at his trade, or has no trade to fall back upon, he must take to unskilled labor or look for odd jobs. If the labor market be overcrowded, if he be only one among thousands of the unemployed that throng the streets of large cities, his is a precarious plight. He is friendless, and his association must be with those that ask no references. Among such, excessive drinking is more or less rampant, profanity and religious indifference is not uncommon, and in general it must be conceded that while such associates are not necessarily criminals, they nevertheless make little for the moral uplifting of one that has lately come from prison.

When now under all these circumstances the ex-convict contrasts the irksomeness of his life with the acquisition of money and of enjoyments that he himself had experienced in the past, or that he knows others to have experienced through dishonesty, his good resolves are apt to be blown to the winds. Of course, it is his own free will that determines him to go back to a life of crime, but, after all, we human beings are all of us to a great extent that which circumstances have moulded us to be. "Our resolutions are the children of circumstances, and upon circumstances their execution also depends."—Shakespeare. Many of our virtuous people are good because they are not pushed to the bad—many a recidivist has struggled hard before succumbing to the pressure of adversity. Has this been sufficiently considered when we form harsh judgments over the man in prison, or the man from prison?

Let us be fair. The man in prison and the man just from prison are not by any means martyrs to a sacred cause—in most cases at least punishment has been merited—sometimes punishment too severe has been given, sometimes punishment too slight. I am still a believer in the old-fashioned idea of the vindication of outraged justice of the External Law of Compensation. But the vindication of outraged justice does not call for the absolute crushing of the transgressor. Christianity is too deeply imbued with the personality of the Good Shepherd, the story of the Magdalene is too prominent, to allow Christians to mould their attitude on such a principle.

I have heard and have read much about the necessity of distinguishing between a criminal and a convict, but I wonder how many among us ever stop to draw this line of distinction when we meet a man discharged from prison? How few, indeed, have charity and a sense of justice and fair play; how few are free from bias and suspicion when brought in touch with an ex-convict; how many that, ignorant of the number that have stood firm in their resolves for good, will insist on seeing only those that have again fallen!

Sympathy for the ex-convict, however, should not be allowed to get the better of good judgment. The men that eventually reach our prisons are for a great part persons of weak will-power, weakened by

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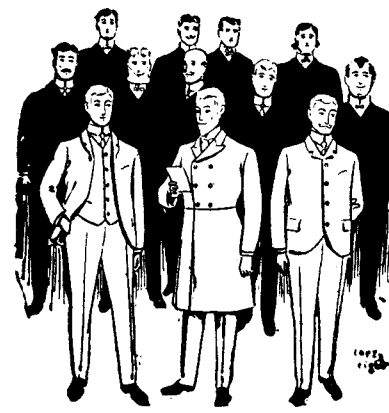
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indulgence to passions of various kinds; lacking in solidity of character; not virile in straining towards ideals of morality; heedless of the warning voices of religion. Not but that all of us, having been born in original sin, bear in us a taint of similar infection—and how many "respectables" might now be in prison, if benign environment

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The Northwest Review is the official organ for Manitoba and the Northwest, of the Catholic Mutual Benefit Association.

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