

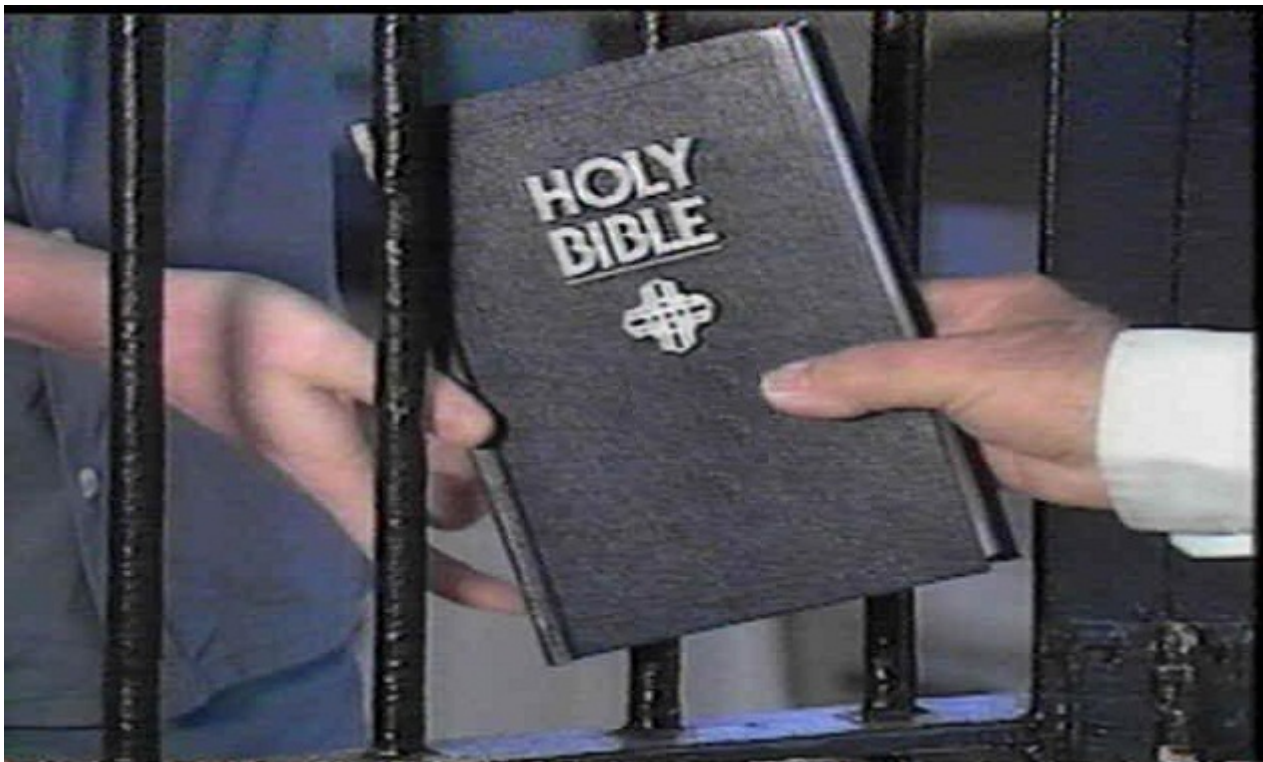
F - The Scarlet Letter (Part II) (Fr. Stephen Powley)

[Ξένες γλώσσες](#) / [In English](#)



“UNBIND HIM”

John was coming home after being away for the past five years. You might think the family would be planning a great party and feast to celebrate the return of their son. Instead the family was in turmoil about how to handle his return. You see John had been branded with a capital “F” on his forehead for he had become a Felon. This wasn’t a literal “F” but the family knew that everyone would see it. These past five years of his life had been spent in the deep darkness of prison. Some of the family wished he were moving to another town so they wouldn’t be embarrassed by him. Other family members wanted him home, but didn’t know exactly how to handle the situation.



John had made some bad choices while he was away at college and ended up going to prison. He was always a good boy that had served in the altar until he was 16.

Now at 25 he was coming back to his home and his Church. When they heard that John was returning, a few well-meaning people came to John's family wanting to know if John was going to be a danger to the people in the Church. One man asked them to make sure John didn't get near any of the girls in their "Singles Group" as he didn't want them getting involved with his type. Of course, all of this was said in love. People were simply afraid because John had become a felon.

The truth of the matter was that John had paid his debt to society and just wanted to start his life over with the people he loved. He had realized the mistakes he had made and didn't ever want to go down that path again. His faith had deepened tremendously and he was ready to be a part of his Church and the community again. He wanted to get a good job and prove to everyone that he was truly a changed man. What helped get him through those very long five years were the memories of family, friends, and Church. When he thought about what kind of life he wanted to live after prison, it was to be back in that community of wonderful people. He just wanted a normal life again.

When John arrived home, his self-image was about as low as one could get. When he looked in the mirror, he saw that "F" emblazoned on his forehead and didn't know how to erase it. He felt so very ashamed and had a difficult time looking anyone in the eyes. On his first Sunday back in Church the icy stares of others caused him to look down most of the time. No one came up to greet or welcome him during coffee hour. He left feeling that "F" shining even brighter. He made an appointment with his priest. His priest told him that he would pray for him, but that he wasn't sure the Church was ready for "a man like him." He was sure that John would understand.

John tried to find a good job but every interview ended at the same point when he told them that he had just gotten out of prison. He so desperately needed someone to vouch for him, but no one would step forward. He finally found a job washing dishes. He was determined to be a success, but didn't know how to even begin. Without any support from his friends or Church, John's future was looking mighty dim.

This scenario is being played out over and over again across this country of ours. Orthodox men and women are coming out of the darkness of prison, wanting to succeed in life, only to find rejection from the very people they knew and sadly from their Church community. Most people on the outside of prison only know what television or the movies have portrayed it to be. When someone comes to their Church or community, the immediate reaction is one of fear. Instead of finding the help and support they so desperately need, they find rejection.

In chapter 11 of the Gospel of St. John, we find the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. There were many people standing there, watching what was taking place. **Jesus “cried with a loud voice, «Lazarus, come out.» The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with bandages, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, «Unbind him, and let him go.»** Jesus had raised a man 4 days dead in the darkness of a tomb back to life, but He didn't unbind him. Instead, He called upon the people to unbind this man.



Many of the men and women coming out of the darkness of prison are very much like Lazarus. They have committed their whole lives to Christ, having rediscovered (or embraced for the first time) the Orthodox Faith. While in prison they found the True Faith, but they are coming forth with so very many things binding them up. They don't know how to start this new way of life...or to truly belong in a Church...or how to find employment...or how to locate housing...or how to re-establish relationships with family and friends...and the list goes on. All of these can be fearful things that take great determination and support to accomplish. As these men and women are returned to life in our society, Christ continues to call the people nearby to unbind them and help them become all they can be in this life.

This story of Lazarus was the inspiration behind the vision of the Executive Director of Orthodox Christian Prison Ministry (OCPM), Chaplain Patrick Tutella, when he established the Lazarus Project. This program seeks to help reintegrate people into

society by promoting family and community reconciliation. It is a one year holistic team-mentoring program that addresses the specific spiritual, emotional, mental and physical needs of people who have been in conflict with the law. Teams of three volunteer mentors are matched with one participant after they are released. You can learn more about this program at: <http://theocpm.org/st-lazarus-project/>

According to THE NATIONAL REENTRY RESOURCE CENTER, “708,677 sentenced prisoners were released from state and federal prisons in 2010. In a study that looked at recidivism in over 40 states, more than four in 10 offenders returned to state prison within three years of their release.” (http://reentrypolicy.org/the_problem)

How many of those men and women returning to prison was a result of the absolute rejection they ran into? Rejected by the people in their communities and unable to find work, their futures begin to look mighty dim.

If the number of Orthodox men and women in prison was only 0.5% of the population (a small estimate), then over 3,500 Orthodox would be coming out into our communities each year. Some like our fictitious John will be coming home to their own Church. Many Orthodox men and women will be paroled to cities other than their home city. They will seek out the nearest Orthodox Church to become a part of that community. Others may have embraced Orthodoxy while in prison and are coming to a Church because they fell in love with the True Faith.

It is not a matter of **“if”** someone like this will one day come to your Church, but rather it is a matter of **“when”** someone like this will walk through your doors. If this someone just out of prison were to show up at your Church next Sunday, would your community be ready to love and embrace him or her...to be one of those who unbind him or her?

Now truly is the time for your Church to get educated and prepared. Please do not be one of those Churches that “just aren’t ready for that kind of person!” God has a love for those in prison as is evidenced by His words in Matthew 25: “I was in prison and you visited me!” When that man or woman walks out of prison, God’s love for them is still the same and His desire for us to “visit” them has not changed.

OCPM is here to assist your Church in getting educated and ready for these precious souls coming out of prison. To learn more about the ministry of OCPM please visit: <http://theocpm.org>

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.