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CHILDREN BEHIND BARS: A VOICE FOR GREECE'S JUVENILE OFFENDERS

Katerini Gouli, a Greek journalist and juvenile prison worker, is a friend of *Road to Emmaus* staff correspondent, Nicholas Karellos. As we spoke on a sunny morning in a downtown Athens office with Nicholas translating, Katerini fielded calls from dozens of children, as well as officials from whom she was seeking support for an international essay contest on St. Cosmas of Aitolia. Five thousand children had already entered. She told one cabinet minister, "These five thousand children are our hope. You must help them."

RTE: Katerini, Thank you for speaking with us about your work with young people in prison. Can you tell us how you began?



KATERINI: Before we start, I must say that although we've met today for the first time, I feel as if we've known each other for a long time. There is something that links us, as if we've been friends for years, and that link is Christ.

I've been interested in young prisoners since my own youth. I earned my first university degree in the social sciences: economics, political science, sociology, and psychology; we also had classes in criminal law. A group of us became so interested in this that we decided to concentrate on juvenile criminal law. Our juvenile system in Greece was very outdated and we hoped to familiarize ourselves with the

*Downtown Athens with Acropolis,
view from interview window.*



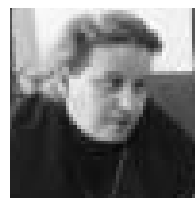
laws of other European countries, including what crimes juveniles are tried for, what the penalties are, what kind of reform programs they have.

We attempted to form an international committee of postgraduate students and professors to examine the legislation of each country. However, to succeed in an international project of this scope we needed support from the state, which wasn't forthcoming, and the project failed. This was a very great disappointment. Nevertheless, several of us postgraduates were allowed to do a *practicum* in the prosecutor's office, where youthful offenders were interrogated and their cases prepared for trial. My job was to interview these children, investigate their environment, and talk to parents, family, friends, and teachers. After I gathered a rather full picture, I submitted my findings to the public prosecutor.

During my *practicum* I came to realize how very unfair the law often is. I had the opportunity of working with both extremely poor families – sometimes nine people living in a small room or even a shack – and others from the middle-class and even extremely wealthy surroundings. It was very bitter to realize that the rich could simply pay a large fine or hire a clever lawyer and their children would go free, while children from poor families, from orphanages, and from the street often ended up in jail. Twenty years ago, the Greek justice system was even harsher than it is now.

I made friends with many of these children and visited them frequently. One day, a homeless boy who slept on park benches suddenly disappeared. After some time I discovered that he had been taken to Rhodes to a dubious "institution." I followed him there and uncovered a highly organized criminal ring that was exploiting these homeless children, almost as slaves. This was unheard of twenty years ago in Greece, and when I tried to bring it to the public's attention, my life was threatened. I knew I would be killed if I continued, so I quit.

For many years, though, it was part of my prayer to find a way to help these children, to help all children faced with neglect or prison. Finally, in 2000, I began a radio program for the Greek Orthodox Church radio station. The name of the show was "Students Have a Say." Many students came to the radio station, and with the cooperation of the Ministry of Education I went to schools, where children of all ages were able to express their heartaches, their problems, their hopes. The show became a link between the students and society as a whole.



This program was broadcast all over Greece, Cyprus and even internationally, and after two very successful years, I began to think about doing the show from within youth prisons. I investigated the possibilities and then submitted a proposal to the Ministry of Justice with an unheard of request – that I, as a journalist, might work within the prison on a continuing basis. This had never been done before. Glory to God, I was given permission and the doors opened to me, after twenty years of waiting. Ours is the first radio program ever to be broadcast from within a Greek prison.

My conclusions are bitter; the reality of children's prisons is very cruel. The Greek court process and the juvenile laws I'd tried to investigate twenty years ago not only remain old-fashioned, but belong to 18th- and 19th-century jurisprudence, and I have the impression that other European countries are not much farther ahead.

A juvenile prison is a storehouse of souls. Without a doubt, the major lack in these children, as well as in our society, is love. What is missing is Christ's love, and all the practical actions that derive from that love. As an example, one 13 year-old boy from a large family of seven children stole seven loaves of bread. He was in prison for seven months. This is an eye-catching example of our contemporary loveless society. He not only had the usual problems of the teenage years, but problems of poverty as well. At the time of his crime, his body and soul were intact. In prison, both his body and soul were abused, and he was released a psychological wreck.

Prison conditions are very cruel and it is horrible seeing naturally active teenagers, hardly more than young children, locked in a cell, or pacing back and forth in a prison yard like beasts in a zoo. In this delicate phase of their lives, precisely the stage when their adult personality and character are being formed, these naturally productive and active teenagers are being violated and ruined. And, as we know, juvenile crime is increasing in every country beyond any previous level.

When a youth breaks the law of the family or of society, he is almost always asking for attention. Parents in Greece often struggle with double, sometimes triple jobs to provide for the family and a proper education, and in the end can forget the child for whom they work. Hundreds of troubled children have been on my radio show with one common complaint: "I don't see my mother." "I don't see my parents." "They aren't by my side as they



ought to be.” One fifteen year-old boy broke into tears asking, “I want my mother, just once, to make me dinner. Don’t I have the right to this?”

So, we see that it is love that is missing for teenagers nowadays, whether they are in prison or not. But it is also missing from the hearts of many adults; they don’t have love to offer. Love has been replaced by material concerns, and this is happening world-wide. This is a moral decline leading to increasingly amoral and dangerous societies. Political and religious leaders are much to blame in this, because the political leaders are voting for anti-Christian laws and the religious leaders are becoming bad examples. Christ taught us simplicity and poverty in dignity. Nowhere in His teaching do we see that the aim of life is material wealth. The message He gave was one of *asceticism*, and a love for our brothers.

Life is a gift of God to each of us, in order to gain eternity. We are to use material goods decently and properly, and if we are honest with ourselves, we need very little to live. Man’s purpose on earth is to struggle, that he may show his “credentials” to enter the kingdom of God, and the Lord has told us how to do this – but society teaches that the purpose of life is to be shareholders, to have real estate and wealth. But the means of obtaining these are destroying our society. Is it possible to harvest love and peace if we sow bombs and war? One of our worst sins is this exploitation of youth in the name of peace, using them as the instruments of our economic and political crimes, which we disguise as virtue. In this regard, what we sow, we reap. You can’t get lemons from an orange tree.

St. Cosmas of Aitolia said, “The catastrophe of the world will come from the educated,” and we see this happening now. The “educated ones,” as he called them, are not able to deal morally with the results of their technical knowledge. We have a knife to slice bread, which is something useful, but we also use the knife to kill our neighbor. It is the very same knife.

Contemporary society is already bankrupt by technology and speed. Distances have been eliminated through the internet, but this hasn’t succeeded in really helping people. What technologically advanced country do we see bringing peace or happiness to others? In 2002, Greece used 800 million tranquilizers a year for a population of ten million people, 500 million sleeping pills, and about 600 million anti-depressants. How can a society be good if its members can’t even sleep properly?



When I ask contemporary children on my show, both in and out of prison, what the words “virtue” or “values” mean, they can almost never explain. They’ve heard the words, but they don’t know their meaning. Our children are learning violence through television, which has replaced parents – I know of many parents who, when visitors come, will put the children into a separate room, turn on the T.V. and throw some junk food on the floor as if they were pigs. If families are not functioning, we shouldn’t be surprised that the world has become what it is. Some months ago the world press showed pictures of students in an Ivy League university in the U.S. “express themselves” by smashing luxury cars, storefronts, etc., “just for fun.” This is a picture of progressive America, and what their society and our own is lacking. In Greece, we see not only drugs, but alcoholism from increasingly young ages, even in primary school.

The meaning that all modern societies lack is Christ, Who gives us the balance and patience to bear worldly injustice, while expecting heavenly justice. Christ our Lord told us that the path is narrow that leads to eternal life, and one needs to struggle. We are all guilty of the state of our societies. As Dostoyevsky said, “Without Christ, everything is allowed.” A Christian education that aims at the cultivation of the soul is the only education that can give us a truly cultured and educated youth.

RTE: And how do you cultivate the souls of these incarcerated children?

KATERINI: I approach the children both in and outside prison with love. Love with patience bears the fruit of trust. The basic condition of showing love is to listen, to believe what they say to you, to recognize their rights, and to know that every child has a unique gift. This gift, which is given to every child by God, is to know intuitively the difference between what is fake and what is real. You cannot fool a child. Because this sense of truth co-exists only with inner purity and innocence, the younger they are, the stronger it is; this is the grace of God protecting them. If you look a child in the eyes, he will look at you, and he will understand you even without your speaking. There have been cases in prison where I waited for six months before I approached children, so that they had time to feel my presence, to know that they could open their hearts to me. The distance that separates children from adults is set from the adult side. Children understand adult intentions and they want to trust someone.



RTE: So, you believe that children are as they have always been, but it is our adult society that has changed for the worse.

KATERINI: Exactly. Children commit crimes, or are naughty in the family to attract attention. Whenever a real lack of interest arises in the family, we have a situation set up for real law-breaking.

RTE: But children often break rules, even family rules, simply because they want to do something their parents don't allow, or as teenagers they want to assert their independence, and this happens even in very attentive families.

KATERINI: Youth is like this, yes. Children want to experience everything, and in these instances, feelings are working, not good judgement. There is no developed critical thought.

RTE: So, there is misbehaviour that arises out of a desire to experience life without yet having sound judgement to set the limits, and more serious transgressions and criminal acts that may result from a lack of loving attention.

KATERINI: Either not enough attention, or because of their special needs. I have spent time with many young people in prison, and sometimes just being present and conversing works like therapy with them. Some of them ask to be interviewed on our show, they want to tell their stories, they want to feel that they are heard.

One of these young people wasn't even Greek, he was German. He was a phenomenon because before he ended up in a Greek prison, he'd run away from state institutions over two hundred times. He is in prison now because he committed murder, he killed someone when he was thirteen years old. Before that he had been running away from home since he could remember. His parents are divorced and his mother, a singer, was declared unfit. The state put the boy into a children's home in Germany, but he dreamt only of freedom and saw every institution as a prison. In his case, the freedom he wanted was to go back to his mother, and this he tried to do two hundred times. He changed institutions constantly, running away weekly. Finally he was sent to a remote "home" in northern Greece near the Bulgarian border. He escaped despite very strict surveillance, and ended up a thousand kilometers away in Athens.

Of course, he ended up using drugs. He created a false world for himself, by filling his lack of personal love with drugs. He was sleeping on the benches in



Omonia Square, where he met another young street boy who took him to a cheap hotel. They lived by stealing. When pickpocketing wasn't enough, they decided to become robbers. They had heard that a certain old man in Athens had 2,000,000 euros. Stupidly, they believed that he would have these "millions" at home.

After we spent time together in the prison, he asked to give a public apology in a broadcast interview, where he described the murder in detail. This should be translated into every language, so that our contemporaries can understand what they are doing when they push for more pleasure and gratification.

We'd taken a dose of drugs, but it wasn't very good quality and it didn't 'catch us,' so we went to the old man's home. He was old enough to be our grandfather. I was thirteen and the other two boys were fourteen. At first we beat him with wooden clubs, and when we thought he was unconscious, we searched his house. But somehow, he got to his feet, and when we saw him, we went out of control and beat him to death. His face was completely smashed. It was horrible.

This boy is now in a Greek prison; he has truly repented for what he has done, and something that I want to emphasize here is that there is a very big difference between adults and juvenile criminals. From my years of working in the prosecutor's office, and now in prison, I know that children almost never deny their crime. When they are innocent, they loudly claim, "I didn't do it," and in almost every case when a child is accused and vehemently denies it, in the end we find that he was innocent. In Greece, however, they are imprisoned until that innocence is proven. They can stay in prison for seven or eight months until their case is heard, but even if they are proven innocent, their psyches have already been violated, and usually their bodies as well.

Minors should not have to go to prison upon arrest. If a child is found guilty, the goal of the state should be to help him recover and realize his crime, to become a healthy member of society, but we have this double standard – the rich man's child doesn't go to prison, while the poor man's child has to be reformed.

The guilty ones who go to prison get everything except reformation, and when they come out, they often end up there again, three or four times. There are children for whom prison becomes their home. They have food and television without having to work for a living, and for some of them, unbelievably, it becomes a cozy situation. Those who want to go to school



wake up at 8:00 a.m., but school is not obligatory, so some sleep until noon and get up for lunch. They sleep and watch TV all day. But this behaviour won't reform anyone. If they were in a normal family they would have to study, they would have to do chores. Some of these children openly say, "My only purpose in life is to get out and to take revenge on society."

If you could have heard this boy's voice as he described the murder, you would have come to some real conclusions about the kind of education we need – I don't mean academic education, but a wider education that includes moral and spiritual instruction. Ancient Greece had that. Children were taken to philosophers and special teachers to gain an understanding of social behaviour, virtues, ethics, as well as intellectual subjects, but today we focus exclusively on obtaining skills that will allow us to produce. Every youth is a mirror of the families of his society.

RTE: What are the prospects for the German boy?

KATERINI: I believe there is hope for him, that he can become a good man. He is serving fifteen years. He also has some incentive – he's working at the prison farm, which may get his sentence reduced a bit, he's taking computer classes, he speaks perfect Greek, and can even perform the traditional Greek shadow theatre. He has a great need to be loved, and once, not long after I'd met him, he didn't believe me when I said I would be back in a few days. When I returned, he was rehearsing on stage. I went into the hall with the director of the prison, and when he saw me, he began leaping over the chairs and desks of the hall to get to me. He said, "Thank you so much for not disappointing me." He's seventeen and a half now. He will be in this prison until he is twenty, when he will be moved to an adult prison.

All of these young prisoners have the same complaint, that they should have a second chance. I agree with this, but it should be given under the right circumstances, such as vocational schools. There is a saying, "When you open a school, you close a prison." The prisons should be places where these children are taught real jobs, like plumbing or electrical work so that they can sustain themselves after they leave. They should learn a skill so that they won't need to steal again, and there should be a quota of them absorbed into the state administration as state workers. Society also needs to be educated so that they can be received back into society once they are released. We have a



very big problem with their reincorporation into society, and the awareness of this is only beginning.

There is a Greek song, which we play at the beginning of our program... "When the gates of this prison open, there won't be anyone waiting for me..." This is something they all feel acutely, and this song has become their anthem.

Materially, there is a little help for them when they leave – programs from the Orthodox Church, the Red Cross, and a few others that give some clothes and a few material goods. But what they really need are healthy human relationships and an understanding of God's presence.

RTE: Is there any Orthodox religious life in the prison?

KATERINI: Yes. They have a priest visiting them, assigned by the local bishop, and they can attend services if they wish. There is also a confessor who comes, but there are only a few who decide to go. Sometimes individual parish priests also visit.

A number of foreign children have become Orthodox inside the prison. They are baptized there. When I asked one of them, another young murderer, "Why did you become Orthodox?" he said, "Because of the eyes of the Mother of God." (He meant, through an icon in the chapel.) "She listens to me. I found peace, love, and a meaning, and I'm going to be a better man. Since I've come to know her, if I could, I would go back in time so that it was me that was killed, rather than being the murderer." He's praying, his life has changed. The word of God is the only thing that can help the souls of these children. Once they realize that repentance brings salvation, they can stand up psychologically and emotionally.

RTE: You said earlier that the first thing you do when you meet a young person in prison is to listen. And after that?

KATERINI: The most important thing is to love them. A relationship with them demands an inner purity on your part, and although they are criminals, they feel this. When I speak to these children I always feel hope at their spontaneity and clarity. They have a freshness in communicating, they are original and they don't lie about essential things. When they open their soul to me, this is the first step towards the confession that may lead them to repentance.

They listen in a very simple way, and you, as an adult, can also transmit Christ in a very simple way, but you must have Him inside of you first. When



they are in a trouble, in difficulties, I tell them that they should look to Christ on the cross, to come closer to Him through prayer. I tell them, “Christ hears everything.” These imprisoned children have never been taught the value of prayer, so I say, “Everything that you ask from the Lord He will give you, if it is good for your salvation.”

In such simple ways you can lead them to prayer and to the truth that adults often reject.

You must also be brave enough to tell them that the face of life is very cruel. “You have committed a crime, you stole, you hurt someone. In order to gain back your place in life, to be accepted by society, by an employer, by the neighborhood, you will have to struggle. Only evil is obtained without struggle. You looked for happiness by stealing, robbing or killing, and this didn’t lead you to happiness, but to prison. The truth is that the path is narrow. There is no middle way, you have to choose.”

RTE: Have you seen these young people’s prayers answered?

KATERINI: I’ve seen dramatic changes in their lives. Once they begin going to confession and truly repenting, their spiritual life begins. They attend services, liturgy, they receive Holy Communion. They themselves feel their life change dramatically. They want to be delivered from the evil they have done.

The young man I spoke of who was baptized in prison, was a Muslim. Muslims often have an active faith, so his conversion was even a greater miracle than for a baptized Greek child who had never practiced his religion. What he found in Orthodoxy was a living belief; he knows now that Christ, the Mother of God, and the saints are listening to him.

RTE: And how has God answered your prayers in your work with these children?

KATERINI: God’s providence isn’t limited to this specific work. I will never have my own children as I’ve made a personal vow to serve Christ and the Church, and someday I believe that I will become a nun, but for now these are my children. For each of us, God’s presence is at work at every minute, but we have to understand how it manifests.

One story I can tell is from the time I already mentioned, when I was investigating juvenile crime as a postgraduate and uncovered some corrupt circles of organized crime who were exploiting children. My life was threatened, and



I went to talk to a close friend who specialized in criminal law. He warned me, “Do you know what you should expect if you keep digging into this? You should expect anything and everything... things as simple as a car ‘accidentally’ going out of control that will pin you to a wall and kill you.”

One Saturday afternoon not long after, when all the shops and businesses were closing and everything was quiet, I left the juvenile court on Panepistimiou Avenue in Athens, a main downtown street. The streets were rather empty and I turned down a side street, my usual route. Suddenly, a car came quickly around the corner and deliberately moved over onto the sidewalk. Because I’d been forewarned, I knew what was coming. I looked around for a doorway or a niche I could duck into, but, the location was well-chosen and there was nowhere to escape – I knew I would be pinned to that wall. I understood that my end was here and I raised my eyes to heaven and said, “Panaghia, forgive my sins and save me.” I had no doubt I was going to die. At that very moment, a priest came from somewhere behind me and threw me up onto a window ledge. Once I was out of range, the car suddenly veered off and sped away. I was saved, but I couldn’t understand how I had been lifted. By my feet? Under my arms? I didn’t know, but I had felt myself lifted to the windowsill *above my head*. As soon as the car sped away, I looked around for the priest to help me down, as the window was quite high, but there was no one there. Finally, I just jumped. After some time, I came to know quite clearly that the priest was St. Nectarios of Aegina.

This is just one example of how God is as present as we need Him. We all live through many daily miracles, but we don’t have the eyes to see them. However, when you ask, you receive, as long as this is according to the will of God. Everything works for our salvation.

In closing, I’d like to say that the youth of every nation is our hope. If we don’t sow the right seed, there is no way for us to harvest righteous individuals, families, citizens. The greatest investment in every nation is its youth. They are our bright future. Through the small effort of our radio shows, a group of international professionals in criminal law and juvenile incarceration is being prepared to reexamine juvenile law throughout the Balkans and Europe. When this is complete, they will submit proposals to the European Union and the European Court. And so my old dream may finally come true, in God’s time. Faith, patience and love does the work and God’s grace fills it, but we need faith. ♣