

## **Another Journey home to Orthodoxy**

**By Constantine**

A team of 120 members of the London Robbery Squad arrested me, my builder and electrician in Devon on 17<sup>th</sup> April 1991. I had to strip, put on white paper suit and wait in a cold empty cell for 3 days and then I was charged with various conspiracy offenses and remanded in custody at Exeter Prison. I had often driven past the prison and had never considered that one day I might be a guest of Her Majesty! As an ex policeman I was warned to ask for the '43's' by the escorting officer, but I really hadn't understood what that meant. A mistake had been made and I felt sure that it was only a matter of time before I would be released, so I insisted on going on the main wing with all the other men and refused 'Rule 43' protection.

News of my arrival travelled fast and I soon had hundreds of men wanting to vent their anger out on me, due solely to the fact that I had once been a policeman. It didn't matter that I had left some years earlier. As far as they were concerned, I was still a policeman and 'the enemy'.

Escorted to 'B' wing with 2 other inmates I was locked in a cell the size of a bus shelter. After having lived my life in relative luxury up until that moment, it came as quite a shock to have to share a cell with 2 total strangers! It was filthy, no toilet and only the use of a bucket, no sink, little ventilation and poor lighting and the stench of urine and excrement was overpowering. As he closed the door I heard the Prison Officer grunt "Three more pieces of s\*\*\* off the street". I knew that I had done some bad things in my time, but I never thought that I had deserved to be treated or spoken to in this manner. The three of us remained in these conditions for periods of up to 23 hours a day and trying to cope with the monotony and violence of prison life was difficult. At first 'bang up' seemed like a lifeline to me as it was difficult to kill a man whilst he was locked away in a cell! Although I had a strong physical presence, I knew that I couldn't defend myself against 600 men and I was gripped with terror. I ate very little for the first three weeks and my weight dropped by nearly 4 stone. The food repulsed me and I couldn't bring myself to eat it, but my fellow inmate said "If you don't eat you will die in here". He was right of course and I had already considered that as one of my options for early release. I spent the first 14 months on remand walking in my own strength, unable to see my children and being systematically stripped of all my worldly possessions. You can't keep up your mortgage payments when you are in prison. Daily I sifted through my food searching for pieces of broken glass and slivers of razor blades and smelling it for traces of chemicals. There are more ways of getting to someone that you hate in prison than you can imagine! I grew more angry by the day at the injustice done to me and I wanted revenge against those who had put me there. I scoured my life searching for answers. Every day I mourned for my son Peter who had died as a baby whilst the family were out shopping and for the welfare of my sons and I kept raking through the ashes of my broken marriage trying to make sense of my life.

The police were able to convince a jury that 2 out of the 3 of us were guilty of at least thinking about committing a crime together and we were convicted and the electrician was acquitted. I received 12 years for conspiring to kidnap and 12 years for conspiring to blackmail with a further 3 years for not having a firearms certificate to run concurrently.

Now being a convicted criminal with a lengthy sentence meant that I qualified for a single cell. I could now use a toilet without being in the company of my cellmates and on the Wednesday following my conviction I went to listen to a visiting speaker from an outside church. The room was packed with prisoners and as I entered they jeered at me. The visitor was a Bishop from Africa and he told us that he had the responsibility for overseeing hundreds of churches. No one thought to ask him what denomination he was and it seemed hardly relevant at that time. "Today I have not come for all of you; just one man and when he hears what I have to say he will know who he is and he will know that I am speaking the truth." The Bishop went on to describe me exactly. So much so that I immediately jumped to my feet saying "It's me! I'm the man that you're looking for!" I went forward and prayed with him and reaffirmed my faith, which, to be quite honest, had been pushed back to the furthest recesses of my mind. I hadn't even considered that 'God' could help me with these problems.

Walking back to my cell that night I had hoped for a bolt of lightning to strike me or to hear the sound of God's voice giving me instructions, but 'Nothing! Absolutely nothing!' An inmate said "Well, what did God do to help you then?" and he laughed. All I could think of saying was "Nothing yet, but I have made a promise to God and I'm going to keep it". After all, what had I got to lose? I suppose that was the moment when I had made a conscious effort to stop walking and trusting in my own strength and knowledge and I had started my early steps of walking in faith, trusting in God. It was scary and at that point I had no idea how quickly my faith was about to be tested.

The following day, Gary, a huge drug crazed Rastafarian called to me: "Copper! Come out here and die!" It was 'slop out', a time when the doors open for a few minutes in order for us to empty the toilet buckets. Gary wanted to kill me and he kept calling to me. So I walked out of my cell, looked at him and said "Don't be stupid, you can't kill me out here, the 'Screws' will see you. Come into my cell and you can kill me in here without any witnesses." I turned and went back inside and he followed. There were 2 chairs either side of a small table pushed against the wall and I sat furthest from the door and invited Gary to sit opposite me. He said "But I'm going to kill you!" I said "In a minute, there's plenty of time. You can do it when we've finished our game of backgammon." We both sat and played and the prison staff, who were having difficulty controlling him, locked us in together. I told Gary all about my promise to God. He asked me about my cross that I wore and I told him how I was baptised 'Constantine' in the Greek Orthodox Church in Malta when I was 5 years old and showed him my baby teeth marks on the back. I can't remember who won the game of backgammon but Gary and I shared several hours together. Eventually the doors opened and as he got up to leave he said "I don't want to kill you no more, man. Pray for me, eh?"

Just before I was transferred to Wandsworth Prison, I was in the Gym and I could hear both volley ball teams plotting to do me serious harm in the changing rooms at the end of the session. I recognised the signs as all the prison staff normally disappear when a planned violent attack is about to happen. Not wanting to wet myself, I went to the toilet. I looked up and said "Listen God, I know that I'm one of your children and if you want me to receive this beating I will, but, I thought that you were going to protect me?" No immediate answer... I shrugged my shoulders and walked back into the changing area where a gang of predominantly black men confronted me. The ring leader said "Listen 'copper' this is not personal, okay. You have to be dealt with before you go to Wandsworth, that's all. If we don't do it the 'Brothers' in Wandsworth are going to ask why we didn't. Do you understand?" I said "Yes, of course; get on with it then. But remember this, it's not me that you are attacking, it's God. I am one of his children and His Spirit lives in me. If you harm me you are going to have to answer to Him."

A look of incredulous disbelief and fear shot across their faces and they immediately started to argue amongst themselves about 'the brotherhood'. Using a 'shocked' voice, I said "Are you guys black?" There was a pause "Are you taking the p\*\*\*?" I said "No, of course not. I don't see colour, so it isn't relevant to me, but it's obviously important to you. If you are black, you must know what it's like to be victimised because you have been victimised for centuries and it's cruel. Isn't it strange that you are now doing that same thing to me! How do you feel about that?" More arguing. "Who are you, cool hand Luke! Why aren't you afraid of us?"

Gary suddenly appeared from nowhere and stood in between me and the ring leader. He spoke very calmly and to the point. "This is a good man. He believes in God!" He turned to look at me and said "If you gona hurt him, you gotta do me first."

The ring leaders response spewed out of his mouth "You a f\*\*\*\*\* brother or what?" "Of course I'm a brother! He's a good man. Leave him alone..."

Gary had turned into an angel and I left the Gym unharmed praising the Lord! Gary told me later "You know what they wanted? They wanted your gold cross to sell for drugs on the wing!"

Shortly after that incident I was transferred to Wandsworth Prison and placed on 'E' Wing. I shared my cell with a man who had been convicted of murdering 2 people over a drugs debt. I couldn't lie on my bed as it had been urinated on, so I rolled out my bedroll and lay on top. When he woke up I told him that I was an ex policeman and that I had made a promise to God and I was going to serve Him. He was shocked and said "You're going to die in here, brother." I said "If that's His will. But I don't think so. He's going to protect me". I could hardly see him in the badly lit cell, but he said "Yeah, right." During my time at Wandsworth I lived amongst nearly 1,000 convicted criminals and remained unharmed. I wrote to Gary and thanked him for helping me and he wrote me a lovely letter back.

When I was transferred to Maidstone Prison I was put on the long term lifers' wing. On the same coach were 2 Christian inmates, one was serving life and the other 8 years for multiple bank robbery. I was put in a single cell next to 'Wolfy' another Christian who played guitar and we sang lots of Christian songs together. The men knew who I was before I had got onto the wing, so I thought it best to approach them with honesty. I approached the Probation Officer who had an office on the wing.

"Please can you tell me who runs the wing?"

"Why?"

"I've seen it on telly, there's always a 'Main Man' who runs things in these sorts of places".

"Yes there is. Why do you want to know who he is?"

"I'm an ex policeman and I just want to introduce myself to him".

The colour fell from his face instantaneously.

"The Governor needs to know about this right away. You are going to die in here! There are men in here who are NEVER going to be released and they have nothing to lose by killing you".

"That's OK I'll be fine".

"No! They are going to kill you! You MUST get out of here!"

He left quickly and indicated to a man called Terry who was wearing a green and blue track suit top. I approached Terry and I introduced myself to him and we walked to my cell for a chat. I explained my situation and he said "Yeah, I know you're a 'copper'. As you've been straight with me you won't have any problems with 'my men'. The odds of you getting plunged are very high though, so watch your back." I knew that there was a swimming pool at this prison, so I said "That's OK, I'm a good swimmer," He smiled and said "No stupid, plunged with a knife! You don't have a clue, do you?" I said "Not really, but I have God on my side." His smile turned to a grin and he said "You're going to need Him big time in here, the last guy they didn't like was disembowelled on the landing in front of everyone last week and 2 others were torched in their cells before him. Good luck!" I was intrigued and asked "How were they torched?" He replied "Petrol, from the lads on the gardens".

Over the next 3 weeks I sank into the deepest parts of hell and the men tormented me every day with threats and verbal jibes. The Principal Officer on the wing took me into his office and said "I can't help you if you need help. These are dangerous men. I can't make you go on Rule 43 but my advice is to transfer wings immediately. The men all know who you are and they are making plans to hurt you". I said "That's OK, they don't mean it and they won't harm me because God is looking after me".

I was eventually confronted by 6 angry men on the landing outside my cell. All I could think of saying was "May God bless you and protect you. He loves you all and so do I." I kept walking. They were so shocked that they were unable to speak or lay a hand on me. However, a few days later one of them threw a bucket of human excrement over me and my cell. I had to throw everything out because the smell was unbearable! The prison staff, who I think were more afraid of them than me, refused to give me a clean mattress or linen and in front of the other men said "Fresh linen is only issued once a week and that was yesterday. Why do you need fresh things?" They had seen what had happened and the big rule in prison is not to be a 'grass' so I said "I have wet

my bed". He said "Well, put it all back in your cell and wait till then". I refused and spent hours cleaning my cell but I was still unable to get rid of the stench and I ended up sleeping on the steel straps on my metal bed, with no covers, no coat, no mattress and with the window open wide. I was frozen!

Later that week another group of 5 men charged into my classroom on the Education Block. The tutor, Ian, who was running a business studies course was caught in the onslaught. Petrified and shaking he froze to his seat. I stood up and said: "Are all you guys stupid? You can't kill me in front of a member of staff. Let Ian leave". I pointed to Ian and said "Look at him, for goodness sake let him go and then you can kill me without any witnesses". The ringleader shouted "No, we want him to stay so that he can see what we are going to do to you!" I raised both arms and shouted "Ok! In the name of Jesus Christ, I will take you all on!" He shouted back "We're Muslims and don't believe in Jesus as God, only as a prophet." I said "I know the president of SUFI, he's a friend and he would not be very happy with you behaving like this. Islam is about unity, love and wisdom, not hatred!" They looked shocked and were unable to lay a hand on me. The alarm bells started to ring and I was detained for disturbing the prison and taken to the Segregation Block for my own protection.

Now segregated from the whole prison, I was only allowed out of my cell when all the other prisoners were locked away in theirs. It was for my protection I was told, but I kept insisting that I didn't need protection. During my 1 hour a day legal break from my cell, I chose to take a shower instead of going to the exercise yard. On some days a prison visitor would visit me in my cell. He was locked in with me and we prayed together for my family. I don't remember his name but God will know who he is for sure.

One evening I stepped out of my cell and the staff vanished. I believe that I was given another spiritual warning of danger. I turned the shower on and pulled the nylon curtain closed and quickly tucked myself away in the sink area. Two men, who I recognised from my wing burst into the shower with knives to attack me but I wasn't in there. I ran at them from the side and shouted "come on then, in Jesus name!" They fled in panic running down the stairs and I watched as the Prison Officer let them out.

After refusing continuously to go on 'Rule 43' for protection, I was finally spoken to by the No1 Governor. "What's all this about. You are causing havoc in my prison and you have to go on Rule 43!" I said "There really isn't a problem. The men are just a bit unsettled and once they get used to me they will be fine". He snapped back: "They want to kill you and your problem is that you are just a proud man and won't go on 'The Rule'" I said: "It isn't pride, it's faith. God's watching over me and everything will be fine, you see". He said: "I'm going to have to speak to the Home Office as you are going to die in this prison". I was told that I was being moved to Channing's Wood Prison so I made a poster with a large cross on it and wrote my cell number and "I forgive you". I asked the Prison Officer if I could go to my cell to collect some letters, which were in a plastic bag under my bed and I insisted that I went to collect them personally. We walked from the Segregation Unit to the wing and all the men were moving about on the landing. When they saw me they all stopped and watched me walk to my cell to collect my letters and on the way out I put up my poster on their notice board. I wanted them to see that I wasn't afraid of them. When I arrived at Channing's Wood Prison I had no personal possession at all, only prison property, letters and my cross. I really believed that I was going to die in prison and I had sent all my property out. The only shoes that I had were a pair of old fabric slippers. I was exhausted both mentally and physically and at the lowest point in my life.

Simon, whom I had met in Exeter, was waiting for me outside Reception. He was a Muslim and as I had read his depositions previously, I believe his account of what had happened to him. I said "God has sent me here, Simon!" He looked a bit surprised and said "Why?" I said "I don't know". He said "You have to find out why!" and he encouraged me and joined me in my search for the truth and he later became a Christian at Channing's Wood. He asked to be baptised, so I referred him to the Chaplain who refused and told him to wait until he was released. So he asked me to baptise him on the wing, which I did according to canon of the true Church. I told the Chaplain what I was going to do and asked him to join us, but he refused saying: "If I start baptising the men in the bath on the wing, people are going to think that I'm insane!" So I carried on baptising the men on the wing according to the canon of the Church. At this time I had no contact with an Orthodox Priest and I acted in

faith according to the Great Commission. On some weekends we baptised between eight and twelve men at a time. We fasted and prayed regularly together and our group grew and we met in an area behind the gym, a place we named 'Apostles Corner'. Men were surrendering needles used for drugs and handing in satanic material used for witchcraft, which I destroyed by fire in the Chapel and prayed with the men for forgiveness of sins.

Simon and I joined a Business Studies Course and we were asked to speak on any topic of our choice. I chose 'Life' and when I had finished talking the whole class clapped loudly. From that moment on members of the class asked for help and more and more inmates approached me asking for prayer and help to find God. The Chaplain allowed me to use one of their offices to talk to the men and to pray with them. They gave me a job as a 'Chaplain Orderly' and I believe that God used me to talk to the men and minister to their needs. Although the men would come and speak to me they were not prepared to go to the normal western church services, which frustrated 'The Team'.

Whilst praying in my cell one night, I pleaded with God to show me what He wanted me to do. "Make it simple," I said, "because I am not that bright and I just don't understand what You want me to do." When I finished praying, I looked at my watch and it was 11.00pm. I turned the light off by pressing on a calendar which covered the light switch and climbed into bed. As I pulled the covers up to my chin I heard an audible voice say "Open your eyes!" I opened my eyes immediately because I was on my own and no one was supposed to be in my cell. I saw a hole appear in the air above my bedroom cabinet. It looked like electricity, bright and it shone brighter than diamonds. A rush of electricity came into my body through my feet and I was paralysed from head to toe. The only thing working in my body was what seemed to be a tiny area at the back of my skull, which only allowed me only to 'think' the name "Jesus" and even that was difficult. I was unable to speak or call out and this sparkling hole started to get bigger and ended up about the size of about 1/2 meter wide. I could see through the hole into what looked like outer space and there were stars. I was lifted off the bed in my body and moved into the centre of the cell. I knew that I was in my body because the bed was empty and I was suspended for a brief moment and then my body moved through the bars so that half of it was in the cell and the other half was outside and I was looking down my body into the hole. Then my whole body started to move towards the hole until it reached the opening. I thought that I was going to go through the hole, which was still arcing with light; bright light and I then saw the form of a man with a beard arked in electricity moving through space. My body stopped moving forward and then moved back over my bed and it was then lowered. I didn't wake up because I was already awake and when I tried to lift myself of the bed I was aware of a whirl of a holy presence around my pillow. This presence remained for what seemed like 5 minutes and then it gently subsided. When I checked my watch it was 11.07pm.

In the morning I went with another inmate to the Chapel to run morning prayer, as the Chaplain was on sick leave and he had asked me to carry on with the prayers and the prison staff opened the doors for us. When I touched the light switch there was a loud bang and the switching unit caught fire with flames about 6" to 7" long covering my hand and all the lights tripped. The light switch was still smoking when the electricians arrived and they examined the whole system and were mystified as they were unable to explain the reason for such an occurrence. The system was protected from any power surge on the mains side and all that they could say was that some external power source seems to have entered the unit from the outside.

In my work at the Chapel I was exposed to all the western religions including the various mainstream Christian denominations and ministers, they came and went as the budget allowed and I served refreshments to them and the inmates after their services. I had to do that even for the Pagans who also used the Chapel for their meeting! Upon my request the Chaplain asked the Pagans to use the Multi Faith Room on the main wing as I didn't feel that their presence was appropriate. God used me and the men to make many spiritual things happen in the prison Chapel and on the wing. I have not written about these things before because God has already written about this through His Prophets and Scripture. Anyway, who would believe a wicked sinner like me, a convicted criminal, who only a few years ago would have been hung for the crimes for which he was convicted? Whilst in the prison and after coming out into the world I have been declared a fraud and the work that God did has been

dismissed by those who do not believe in my witness. The western Christianity refuses to believe that they have anything missing from their teaching, referring to Orthodoxy, even by some of the clergy, as Greek Mythology, Greek superstition, contrary to scripture, dogmatic and legalistic and hardly relevant for society today.

My mother died in Greece whilst I was 'inside' and I was told at 11.00pm by 2 prison officers who came into my cell. They confirmed my name and then said: "Your mother's dead!" they turned on their heels and locked me away again, leaving me to cope with my grief on my own. I prayed all this up to God and he brought me a blessed peace, which allowed me to accept that she had fallen asleep. A year later my father died also. I was praying at the time he passed and I was aware of his passing. When the prison officer came to tell me the following morning, I said: "You have come to tell me that my father died last night, haven't you?" He looked surprised and said "Who told you? I said "God." I truly believe that they are both now with my son, Peter.

I asked all the ministers at the prison to explain what was happening to me in order to help me understand and not one of them had any idea of what I was talking about. A Catholic Bishop said: "I am Scientist and the brain generates electricity, so maybe that's what happened?"

When my parole came up for review after 4 years I refused it, saying: "Parole is for rehabilitated offenders and I am innocent of the crimes that I was charged with. You may have my body but you don't have my soul, so when you have finished playing silly games with my body just let me know". I was consequently refused parole and sent for a Psychiatric and Spiritual Examination. When I met with the Psychiatrist she said "Are you homosexual?" I said "I have had lots of offers of homosexual relationships whilst I have been inside, but I have thanked them for the compliment and graciously declined as I have no doubt over my sexuality; I'm straight." She looked surprised and said "Are you sure?" I said "Yes!" So she went on: "Well, you must be a woman then!" Stunned by her remarks I said "Are you serious?" and she replied: "You have the complete profile of a woman." So I said: "Well, if I'm a woman you had better send me to Pucklechurch." which is a prison for women. Her austere response was: "Don't get smart with me!"

A member from the choir at Bath Orthodox Church came to see me after this as he had been asked to find out who I was and through him I was introduced to the Church in Bath and Father Yves came to visit me in Leyhill Prison and Father Luke from Wales also wrote to me. I asked Father Yves the same questions that I had asked the Bishop. He gave me a little book called 'Orthodox Spirituality' by Father Thomas Hopko, which I devoured. It was to reveal to me the answers to so many of my questions that I so desperately wanted answer to and I went on to read other Orthodox books.

I spent over 5 years locked away from the world and during that time I missed the second stage of my sons' lives. I met a lot of men who were struggling to find answers to the purpose of their lives and I felt compelled to help them. Men who did not know what it is like to have a father or how to be a father and are destined to continually drift in and out of the prison system. How we have failed them! I have lived with them, cried with them, listened to how they have been abused as children and loved them wherever they were spiritually and every night, in my dreams, I am reminded of them and I share their pain. I have learned that if we commune with God, He uses us to plant and water the seed of His Holy Spirit in our brothers and sisters and it is God who makes that seed grow.

Since leaving prison in 1996 I have not always got things right, I know, but I have never lost my faith. My mother told me before she fell asleep: "If you lose your money you have lost nothing. If you lose your self respect you have lost something and if you lose your faith, you have lost everything!" I have struggled with illness and pain and still do today. I have made many mistakes and I am still a wretched sinner, but I have been blessed in so many different ways. My gift from God has been my wife, Maria, who has since meeting me silently endured the persecutions of those that hate us. We married in the Orthodox Church in Colchester in 2000 and through that blessing God has used Maria and the children to heal so many of the wounds that I received prior to and during my incarceration. I have been told to move on with my life, but after having known and felt some of the pain of the victims and prisoners, I am unable to stop myself revisiting them every night in

my dreams. I have tried to live my life in the world by being open and honest about my past. I have to declare my convictions to prospective employers for the rest of my life, so moving on has been made extremely difficult. God will show us as a family how we can do this in time. There are many people who are imprisoned in this world, who are confined by invisible bars in their lives and I pray for them also.

My many sins are always before me and through many tears I am assured that He has forgiven me them all and they have been forgotten, but many of those who live in the world seem unable to do the same.

So, how did I find Orthodoxy? All I can say is that the seed of the Holy Spirit was sown in me when I was 5 years old, but, it has taken a lot of watering by many people to help me to finally commune with God. The brothers and sisters that helped me were not all Orthodox Christians, I hasten to add. God didn't say in His 'Great Commission' that we should exclude any particular race or religion. Learning to live a non materialistic life has been one of my greatest blessings and learning the depth of prayer that can be achieved by moving beyond praying with the voice, mouth, lips and tongue and of course fasting, forgiveness of sins and love.

In order for me to move forward with God by living in the western world of Christianity, having an Anglican father and an Orthodox mother, was to find the root of our Christian faith and after tirelessly examining all the faiths, I came home and found true communion with God in Orthodoxy.

All glory to God

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