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Priest proposes plan to heal criminal justice system

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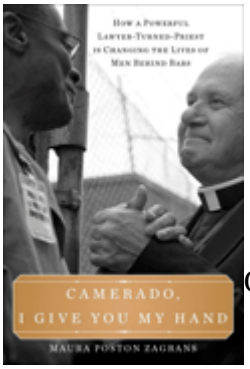

CAMERADO, I GIVE YOU MY HAND: HOW A POWERFUL LAWYER-TURNED-PRIEST IS CHANGING THE LIVES OF MEN BEHIND BARS
By Maura Poston Zagrans
Published by Image Books, $22

With its title drawn from Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, Maura Poston Zagrans' *Camerado, I Give You My Hand* is an account of David Link as priest, practicing his vocation in the Indiana prison system, primarily the Indiana State Prison at Michigan City, a maximum-security facility for about 2,400 men, 70 percent of whom are convicted murderers and all of whom are serving long-term sentences.

The core of the book assembles tributes to Link's unusual ministry, the phenomenal respect he has earned from the prisoners, his extraordinary capacity to listen and counsel men of any religious or nonreligious persuasion to transform their lives, and his uncommon skills as a healer of inmates with deeply wounded lives.

In an "Afterword" -- the best part of the book -- Link himself spells out a concise "Crime Peace Plan." It is a systematic and realistic critique of the U.S. criminal justice system and argues for change that incorporates, at every step in the criminal justice process, principles of healing or rehabilitation. Proposals in the Crime Peace Plan include:

- Obliging every lawyer to carry one criminal defense client at all times or pay into a criminal defense fund to sustain good representation;
- Better, more realistic categorization of crimes to avoid inappropriate incarceration for minor crimes, such as possession of recreational drugs;
- More flexible statutory sentencing guidelines for judges;
- A model procedure for modifying sentences;
- Federal tax credits for employers who hire released offenders.

Link graduated from the University of Notre Dame then entered Notre Dame Law School. After law school, he served as a trial attorney in the office of the chief counsel of the Internal Revenue Service in Washington, D.C., then in 1965 joined a large Chicago law firm, specializing in international tax law.

Link was recruited away from private practice to teach taxation at Notre Dame Law School in 1970. He became associate dean in 1971 and served as dean for 24 years. During that time, he worked for Habitat for Humanity, taught at a local Indiana State Prison, and co-founded a highly admired homeless shelter and service center in downtown South Bend, Ind.

After his retirement as dean, he embarked on a hyperactive career as a senior academic administrator -- as the founding dean of a new law school at St. Thomas University in Minneapolis, academic dean at St. Augustine University in Johannesburg, and first president of the University of Notre Dame Australia.

In 2003, with the death of his beloved wife, Barbara, Link eventually followed up on one of her recommendations, attending a Roman Catholic seminary for later-in-life vocations and became a priest-widower with five children and 13 grandchildren.

The book makes a convincing case that Link is the real McCoy -- a gifted, dedicated, caring man who has transformed his retirement years into the fulfillment, rather than the conclusion, of his exceptional career of service.

But coming to that assumption may take, in my experience at least, dealing with the book's unabashed, even shameless style of total idolization. *Camerado* comprises a relentless parade of encomiums unrelieved by any distance from its subject. I feel I got a sense of the real Link, but it took parting or piercing a kind of mist suffusing the style of this book -- unmitigated by any analytic relief -- of what might best be described as hagiographic treacle.

[Michael Kelly, former dean of the University of Maryland School of Law and chief operating officer of Georgetown University, serves on the board of the National Senior Citizens Law Center, a group of poverty lawyers serving the elderly indigent.]

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