

## Diaconal Work in the Hungarian Prisons

The ecclesial and social environment and the background of the project:

During the time the communists were in power (1958-1989) The Churches in Hungary had absolutely no possibility to exercise ministerial or charitable activities in prisons or to come into contact with the inmates. Shortly following the political change (1989-1990), in 1990 an association for prison mission was founded; which comprised mostly of volunteers who sought to reach out to the inmates. The collaboration between the government and the Churches in Hungary resulted in the founding (in 2000) of the Hungarian Prison Chaplaincy Organization: since then, chaplains (priests, pastors, rabbis) are present in the prisons. However, behind this prison ministry, the presence of Christian parishes or communities was rare or non-existent and no work was done with the inmates' families. In these circumstances Vagner Mihály, a deacon with a civilian profession, started to look for new ways and methods in working with the inmates and their families, both *inside* and *outside* the prisons.

*Molnár Ferenc, IDC Delegate for Hungary*



Vagner Mihály (born 1958) is a deacon with a civilian profession (ordained 2008), married; his wife Éva is a kindergarten teacher. They have five children and three grandchildren. Mihály is an electro technician. His job is with General Electric – high voltage devices, and as a deacon, he works in prisons with “high voltage people”. He is often dubbed “the high voltage deacon“. His wife takes an active part in his ministry.

I became a Christian at the age of 34. I then studied theology and became a certified religion teacher but kept my civilian profession. In 2003, I started volunteering in the prison mission in Vác, also a diocesan see.

I became committed in the Cursillo movement and started dreaming of a “prison Cursillo” at a national level. For this dream to come true, many discussions and agreements were needed with both government authorities and Church bodies in charge of prison ministry. Our missionary body is called “Mécses (Oil Lamp) Charity Service”, in short: Mécses.

First step: “Mécses” family meeting in the prison. Inmates and family members met in a certain space and were able to spend a longer time with each other; it began with a Mass. The families could eat together and talk. Those working for the charity service could, in this way, get to know the families, their situation and their problems at home.



### Second step: Planning of the „Prison-Cursillo”

At the beginning, it looked almost impossible to organize a three-day event in a totalitarian regime. Unexpectedly also for me, I received a lot of help: the auxiliary bishop in charge of Roma ministry, a retired prison commander, a former political prisoner, Cursillo activists and others supported me. It was a huge task to convince the prison commands that a meeting can take place without jeopardizing security.

Third step: First „Prison-Cursillo” not only in Hungary, but also in the whole of Europe, which took place in 2014 in one of biggest Hungarian prisons located in the town of Sátoraljaúhely. The spiritual companion was Auxiliary Bishop Dr. Székely János (advisor for Roma-ministry). The closing Mass could be attended by family members (four family members for each inmate). Before the Mass, the family members took part in a spiritual day of silence.



Mihály, his wife, Éva, a volunteer and the participants



Mass with the Diocesan Bishop Dr. Beer Miklós

### Following steps:

1) 2015 – Founding of the Secretariat for Prison-Cursillos at national level. Five new courses in the towns of Márianosztra, Balassagyarmat, Vác, Tiszalök and again Sátoraljaúhely.

2) Building the network for permanent accompaniment. Cursillo volunteers regularly visit those who took part in the Cursillo in order to strengthen them in faith. In parallel, the volunteers also visit the families in their homes, giving them material and spiritual help

3) 2016: Nine other Cursillos were organized, including the first one in a women's prison. Some inmates who participated in previous Cursillo events now became helpers.

Plans and future outlook: It is our aim that to hold Cursillos in each prison throughout the country and to have the experienced Cursillos participants in the prisons collaborate as helpers and find and accompany new volunteers.

I don't want to give up my dream: I believe that it is possible – even in prison - for one to convert, to keep one's faith and even to build and preserve the cells of Christian communities.