Periodically, some of the Brothers of De La Salle College in Manila visit the unfortunate men confined in jails near the teeming metropolis of the Philippines. During these visits they distribute rosaries, pictures, prayer books and food, contributed for this purpose by the students of the College. During one such visit to the National Penitentiary, Father Vicente Daucyuy, the assistant chaplain, expressed the wish that the Brothers might put their catechetical talents to work for the benefit of the inmates. Elated by this invitation, the Brothers sought and obtained permission to teach catechism to the prisoners every Saturday morning.

It is not new, of course, for Lasallians to extend their teaching activity to prisoners. In several countries, principally England and the United States, the Brothers still man entire schools for delinquent youths; and in many isolated instances all over the world Brothers teach religion regularly to groups of prisoners. In the case of the National Penitentiary of the Philippines, some of the men had already been enrolled in a thriving Legion of Mary; and this group, some sixty strong, was the first to receive catechetical instruction in the classes organized by the Brothers.

Teaching a heterogeneous group in a country like the Philippines usually involves language difficulties. Among the population of about twenty-seven million, one finds over forty-eight distinct dialects. Tagalog, spoken in Manila and the nearby provinces, is the national language; yet despite the efforts made in recent years to teach this tongue in all the nation’s schools, it remains incomprehensible to a large portion of the people. Since the inmates of the prison come from all parts of the country, many of them do not understand Tagalog. Throughout the Philippines, however, the schools use English as the language of instruction from the third year up to the graduate university level. Since the prison Legionaries are all fairly well educated, having graduated from high school or from the university, their comprehension of English is excellent. For this reason the Brothers chose English as the medium of communication in the special religion courses given in Bilibid on Saturdays.

Starting in June, 1962, the religion lessons got under way, with one and one-half hours devoted to this project each week. Lessons on the fundamental mysteries soon gave way to more advanced instructions on holy scripture, dogma, the
selected as the official A.D.C. catechists. Since all ten of them speak several Filipino dialects, they can instruct their companions who use these tongues, thus conforming to the Lasallian principle of using the vernacular. All the convict-teachers received the beautiful silver A.D.C. cross-shaped pin as the official badge indicating their new mission. These pins are always worn on the collars of their bright-orange colored prison uniforms. Almost immediately, these A.D.C. pins, and the status they conferred on the wearers, made the new catechists stand out proudly among the rest as an elite group. The Brothers then gave these men special instruction in methods of teaching, with emphasis on Lasallian procedures, such as the use of the reflection and of socratic questioning. It was deeply moving to see the enthusiasm and simplicity with which these hardened former criminals prepared to teach catechism, after months and years spent in the inactivity, discouragement and humiliation of their life in the Penitentiary.

At this point perhaps a few details about the institution might interest the reader. The new Bilibid Prison ranks as a model of its kind. Detainees from all over the archipelago, with long sentences to serve, are incarcerated here—in all, over 5000 men, more than a hundred of whom are awaiting execution in the electric chair. Women prisoners are sent to another jail nearer Manila. The prison has an excellent rating for cleanliness and order. By definition, one might say, its population includes the most unwholesome elements in the country, yet the visitor is pleasantly surprised to note the friendly smiles, good humor, and high morale of the inmates.

About 80% of the men are baptized Catholics—with Baptism and occasional attendance at Sunday Mass constituting the sum total of their contact with Faith in the past. This high percentage of Catholics in prison corresponds to the percentage of Catholics in the general population, the Philippines being the only truly Catholic country in Asia. About 18% of the convicts are Moslems from the southern islands; and the remainder belong to various Protestant sects. As the Church is no longer established by law in the Philippines, the prison officials must give equal treatment to representatives of all faiths who wish to visit and instruct the men. No visitors representing any religion may carry on actual proselytizing, however; and any switch in religious affiliation on the part of an inmate comes through individual free choice, usually brought about by instruction and by the good example of others. It may be noted with grim satisfaction that never in the history of the prison has a man gone to the electric chair without at least a last-minute Baptism, and the consolation of a priest’s presence.

All of the men show unfailing respect to the Catholic Priest or Brother; and even when not Catholics themselves, they never miss an opportunity to smile and shake hands. Father Benedicto Arroyo, the much respected head chaplain, is a member of the Parole Board, and wields tremendous influence. Together with Father Dacuyuy, he must minister to the spiritual needs of the prisoners, and likewise care for the residents of Muntinlupa town. Overburdened as they are with these labors, the two priests find the establishment of the A.D.C. Catechists’ group within the walls of Bilibid a very precious help indeed.

Many systems for providing the convicts with religious instruction have been tried by the various groups of clergymen responsible for the men’s spiritual welfare, systems ranging all the way from occasional sessions run by overworked priests, to bringing in young student-catechists from our schools. These latter have found
the tough criminals apathetic, and often derisive at the obvious innocence of their instructors. Some Protestant groups have even sent pretty young lady evangelists, who of course have had little trouble in attracting the inmates to their Bible classes! The shortage of Priests and teaching Brothers constrained us to adopt what seems to be the best solution of all: using the talent and good will available among the prisoners themselves. This answer to the problem is also happy in that the inmate-catechists, chosen for their leadership qualities, know their pupils’ problems and shortcomings perfectly well, and can handle disciplinary problems better than anyone else. Moreover, this activity pays them extra dividends, because their position as instructors furnishes them with a desirable outlet for their special energies, and enables them to gain considerable prestige. The odium involved in being considered “pious” dissolves immediately when the prisoners find examples of piety in the most prominent of their fellows. In the few months since the catechetical program got under way, the ten inmate-catechists (three of whom are awaiting execution) wear their A.D.C. pins at all times, and are looked up to by all the rest.

These members of the catechist group, all men of some education, and often experienced in the practice of law or medicine, have no difficulty in learning the Lasallian catechetical method. After hours of study, instruction and preparation under the guidance of the Brother in charge, they are conducted to the cell blocks containing hundreds of convicts. Here the prospective pupils are sorted out according to the dialects they speak, and grouped about portable blackboards; then the catechist who speaks their language takes over. The lesson begins with prayer; then follow the reflection, exposition, dialogue and review. The prayer monitor begins with the familiar: “Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God;” and ends with: “Saint John Baptist de La Salle, pray for us; Live Jesus in our hearts! Forever!” Blackboard sketches and diagrams are used almost exclusively, for since only 10% of the prisoner pupils can read, writing words on the board would help little. It is truly inspiring to see these catechists at work. Their professional approach, their ability to command and hold attention would merit the praise of any experienced teacher. All the principal Filipino dialects are used: Tagalog, Ilongo, Ilocano, Cebuano, Waray-waray, and Pampango. In their spare time, the catechists use other dialects to instruct mountain folk, whose lives, disrupted by weakness or misfortune, must now be led in this strange, grim setting.

Because of the excellent activities previously established by the two chaplains: the Legion of Mary, the daily recitation of the rosary, the periodic drives for more frequent reception of the sacraments, and others, the A.D.C. catechetical project constitutes a mere complement to the work already begun. Since its inception, however, there have been noticeable increases in Mass attendance on weekdays as well as on Sundays, and in the number of men who approach the sacraments. Above all, one can observe a great enthusiasm for learning more about religion. Despite the small percentage of Protestants among the inmates, the Protestant pastors are very assiduous in their visits, and show remarkable zeal in the teaching of Holy Scripture. This is a blessing in disguise for the Catholic teachers. The Protestants’ activity has created among the prisoners an interest in the Bible far surpassing that found among the average group of Catholics outside; and the catechists capitalize on this by using the Bible frequently during their lessons. In passing, it should be noted and deplored that Catholic scholars haven’t yet translated the Bible in its entirety into more than a few Filipino dialects, whereas the Protestants possess beautifully printed editions in just about any tongue you can mention. At present, our efforts for the convicts’ religious instruction suffers woefully from the lack of Catholic Bibles, in any language or dialect.

It is only a dream, of course; but how much a community of teaching Brothers could do in this gigantic compound, where there is so much suffering, so much ignorance, and yet so much good will among these “lost sheep”? Such a group of Brothers could expand this project, by instructing and supervising more inmate-catechists, so that eventually not merely a few hundred convicts, as is now the case, but all the thousands of them might receive instruction each week, and hear at long last the “good news” that most of them seem to have waited for in vain all their lives.