

# Rev. Joseph A. Davies—Jail Priest

By JERRY DUNPHY

The Rev. Joseph A. Davies has a whole of an important job. He is counselor to 1,500 inmates at the Maryland Correctional Institution near Roxbury.

His is an ecumenical role. When you're an inmate and you want someone to talk to it doesn't matter much if the clergyman is Protestant or Roman Catholic. Particularly when your question is on a secular matter or a complaint about the prison itself.

Father Davies gave up a "soft" job counselling teenagers at a middle class Baltimore high school four years ago and moved to Western Maryland.

Most of the men at MCI are "two-time losers." They range from 16 to 26 and usually come from the Baltimore - Washington area. Their priest shares a common bond with his charges. Very few home boys are around to stick up for this part of the state.

Because they make a bad mistake, the inmates are confined to the "farm" for sentences averaging 30 months. Some are murderers, others sold dope or stole cars. MCI officials run

their institution on the premise the youthful offender wants to return to society as a law-abiding, productive citizen.

With an Irishman's sardonic wit, Father Davies kids "the boys" and they kid him. The priest's blue eyes frequently are creased in laughter behind his tri-focal glasses, in a place where a smile is all too rare.

He is buffer between the authorities and the prisoners. The only full-time clergyman on the premises, Father Davies soon will be joined by the Rev. Kloman Riggie, assistant pastor at St. Mary's Catholic Church, Hagerstown, who will work at the Maryland Correctional Training Center starting Sept. 1. The Rev. Aaron Johnson, pastor, of Asbury Methodist Church, Hagerstown, does a splendid job as Protestant clergyman, pro tem.

It is a "tough" for Father Davies on Thursdays, when, while interviewing a new batch, he notices a familiar face . . . The "alum" jokes about seeing the Father again, but he is not glad to be back.

A visitor can't understand how the boys feel until he's been around them awhile. They mask their thoughts because a strang-

er from the "outside" isn't to be trusted. Father Davies lives with them eight hours a day, five days a week and is accepted as a friend.

Prior to his arrival at MCI on June 15, 1963, Father Davies was an assistant pastor in Baltimore and served 11 years as a counselor at Calvert Hall College in the city.

Of his high school experience, Father Davies sees little similarity to counseling at MCI.

"It's weird," he says.

"I thought I knew all the answers, but I found out I didn't know a thing, when I came here."

Father Davies estimates 90 per cent of the 1,500 inmates are "unchurched." By this he means they attended church or Sunday School less than a year.

A man who doesn't picture himself as a crusader, Father Davies looks to prison personnel for help.

Referrals often come from alert guards who spot potential trouble before it develops, and guide a boy to Father Davies. The administration goes out of its way to lend him a hand.

At Sunday's Mass about 150 show up for a variety of reasons.

Father Davies has them cast.

"The smallest group comes to pray," he says.

"The others want to get away from the confinement of their cell or simply visit."

Although they are angry, frustrated young men, Father Davies says most of his charges have not lost their faith in God's existence.

"Most of them are honest enough not to blame Him," he says.

In Baltimore Father Davies became interested in the Boy Scouts of America and has been an activist in the movement ever since.

He is a member of the National Commission of Scouting and is in charge of scouting for the archdiocese as well as serving as Catholic Chaplain for the Boy Scouts in the five-state mid-Atlantic region.

Bringing his accumulated experience to MCI, Father Davies is now in charge of an Explorer Post with another about to be chartered.

He is a priest on the move, who combines the church and a secular approach to the ministry to better serve the inmates.



FATHER DAVIES doesn't cram religion down anyone's throat. His task is to be available when the inmates need him. Usually it takes longer than five minutes for an inmate to get to the chaplain's office. Whether the occasion is a death in the family, a "Dear John" letter or some other personal problem, the chaplain is available to counsel and advise.