

## **Prison Ministry - Intro**

For even the most experienced prison ministers, hearing the clinking sound of the security gates closing behind them is a chilling experience. "It sends a little shiver up my spine," Tom Navin, director of social action and prison ministry for the Diocese of Little Rock, Ark. Navin is one of hundreds of prison ministry staff and volunteers who every week visit the more than 2 million people who are incarcerated in the federal and state prisons, and county jails, across the United States.

Prison ministry is tough work, and it can often be difficult to recruit volunteers willing to go behind the walls and interact with inmates and pretrial detainees, some of whom have committed violent crimes and are serving life sentences. But many inmates - the hardened criminals and nonviolent drug addicts alike - yearn for God's presence, even if they often erect defense mechanisms that prison ministers have to penetrate. Lifelong criminals have been turned around by the Gospel, and volunteers in prison ministry say they often benefit as much as the inmates.

"When we go into the jails, many of our team members and prisoners are transformed," said Sister Judith Krantz, founder of MercyFire Catholic Prison Ministry, a nonprofit that organizes weekend prison retreats for inmates in Pennsylvania, Louisiana and California. "We laugh with the prisoners and we cry with them," she said. "One time, in a Louisiana prison, we were eating with the prisoners, and one guy sat down beside me," Sister Judith added. "He bowed his head, and when he raised his head, his whole face was just drenched in tears. God got him there."

**A call from Jesus:** Visiting the imprisoned is one of the seven corporal works of mercy. Jesus, who spent a night imprisoned after his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, instructed his disciples in Matthew 25:36 that they who visit the imprisoned visit him.

Pope Francis met with about 200 Italian prison chaplains. During his brief audience Oct. 23, the pope stressed each prisoner's humanity. The task of a chaplain, he told those gathered, is to let them know that "the Lord is inside with them." "No cell is so isolated that it can keep the Lord out," he said. "He is there. He cries with them, works with them, hopes with them. His paternal and maternal love arrives everywhere." Read on for more information on this important ministry, as well as for interviews from reformed convicts who are now using their lives to promote the Gospel.

"I remember the words of Jesus when he says, 'Who among you would not leave the 99 and go find the lost sheep?' Well, this is what we do. That is exactly what we do," said Deacon Peter Murphy, director of prison ministry for the Diocese of Phoenix, Ariz. "These people are not write-offs," Deacon Murphy told OSV. "They made a mistake, and the vast majority of them want to make themselves right. A lot of them didn't have the good parental guidance that you and I had. If we can help them, I think we've done a tremendous justice to help those individuals."

About 23 years ago, Deacon Murphy said a fellow deacon asked him if he had ever considered visiting prisons in Arizona. "I said, 'You're crazy.' As far as I was concerned, they did the crime, they can do the time. Let them serve their sentence," said Deacon Murphy, who added that he ^was "hooked" after the first time he visited a prison.

"I don't know what hooked me," he said. "It's so different from ministry to lay folks on the outside. I really can't put into words. It's a feeling of being able to reach somebody. Not all of them, because not all inmates are open, but there's definitely a feeling that you can hopefully help them change their lives a little bit."

In the county jails, lay volunteers help provide the Liturgy of the Word with Communion. Inmates can receive one-on-one spiritual counseling, if they desire. "We take care of providing the spiritual services for each inmate," Deacon Murphy said, adding that volunteers have had to deal with security protocols that have been increased over the past 10 years.

**Building trust: What's Real and What's Not?**

**Myth: Prison ministry is dangerous.**

Truth: "Although this is a common (concern), it usually goes away after the first contact with inmates," said Ron Zeilinger, director of Dismas Ministry. Zeilinger blames sensational media coverage of crime for leading people to believe that everyone locked up in prison is a dangerous criminal.

**Myth: Prisoners have it "made" with TVs and carpeted floors.**

Truth: "Prisoners live in very humble quarters," said Sister Judith Krantz of Mercy Fire. "If an inmate has a TV, it's because he purchased it."

**Myth: Prisoners only go to church services to get out of their cells.**

Truth: "Just like any community, prisoners come in varieties," Sister Judith said. "We are inspired by the depths of their knowledge and holiness. One priest said that the best confessions he has heard have come from prisoners."

**Myth: A prison minister is at risk of being caught up in a violent situation.**

Truth: "It is important to separate myth from reality," Zeilinger said. "It is not likely that a volunteer will come face to face with a famous or dangerous criminal." Still, despite the obstacles, the ministry is able to effectively engage the inmates, particularly during the Liturgy of the Word, Deacon Murphy said. "During the prayers of the faithful, we ask the inmates to verbalize their own needs and their own prayers, and it can be so emotional, particularly with the females who are more extroverted in their spirituality," Deacon Murphy said.

In Arkansas, Navin said he had no formal background in prison ministry when he moved to the Diocese of Little Rock from the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston, ^ where he previously had worked for seven years. He interviewed for a job in his new diocese, and was told the position entailed prison ministry. "I said I had never done it, but I was anxious to learn," said Navin, who became a certified religious assistant, a designation in Arkansas that allowed him to minister to inmates.

Navin's job is to provide ministry to about 140,000 Catholics imprisoned in Arkansas' 16 prisons and five community correctional centers, many of which are located in rural areas. Navin is constantly recruiting priests, deacons and lay volunteers to go into the prisons and lead Bible studies, rosary prayer groups, liturgies and other activities.

"It's very difficult work," Navin said. "People are just afraid of going into prison. It's hard to recruit. That is why we first try to get volunteers exposed first to writing ^letters to inmates. Some then take the next step to visit the prison. When they see that, it opens them up a little bit, and it takes away from the threatening aspect." Building trust among the inmates is a critical factor, which is an early lesson Navin learned. "I would go down to one cell unit every Wednesday morning for Bible discussion and general discussions about current events and things related to the spiritual life," Navin said. "There was a group of 10 to 20 people. After six months, I was hardly getting any response, hardly any feedback. I was a little frustrated, so finally I said, 'I just can't get you guys to open up.'

"One guy said, 'Mr. Navin, we're just learning to trust you,'" he said. "That never dawned on me. This was a group of individuals who didn't have many people they could trust in their whole life. They just needed some time to trust me." "My heart goes out to prison volunteers, because it's a tough ministry," said Scott Woltze, 40, a Portland, Ore., resident who served three years in state prison for robbing banks. Woltze, who had a profound conversion experience after leaving prison, told OSV that inmates are good at reading people, and that their trust is earned, not given.

"Every inmate I knew came from bad backgrounds, abusive homes, and trust was something very rare for them," Woltze said. "Prison ministers need to make the first move, show interest in the inmates, let them know that they're someone who can be trusted. The last thing inmates want to see is running into volunteers who have barriers up."

**Ministry challenges:** However, David Lukenbill, 70, a former career criminal who founded the Lampstand Foundation, an apostolate that provides written materials and resources to agencies involved in prisoner re-entry programs, told OSV that prison ministry can be difficult for laypeople without a background in law enforcement or prior criminal activity.

"You need people who understand that there is evil in the world and some criminals are really ^evil people," said Lukenbill, who spent about 12 years in federal and state prisons for thefts, robberies and assaults. Lukenbill believes the Catholic Church's intellectual tradition is the only antidote to the criminal mindset.

As a volunteer, you need to figure out who is hustling you and who's real," Lukenbill said. "That's not easy. You have to verify things people tell you. You need to find out what they're in for, the details of their crime. Protect yourself, keep an arm's length. Criminals lie and criminals will use you. Criminals will tell you anything. A lot of them are very good at it."

Leonard Rubio, 45, benefited from a supportive Catholic community at San Quentin State Prison in California. "We were like family, many of us would talk to each other throughout the week, support each other and pray for each other," said Rubio, who was convicted of second-degree murder for killing his ex-girlfriend in 1986, when he was 18. He served 23 years in state prison and recalled the spiritual support from priests who visited him in a county jail while he was awaiting trial.

"They would come in, bring me Communion, occasionally they would come in with a Mass kit and say Mass for me," said Rubio, who recalled one visiting Vietnamese priest who had been imprisoned and tortured by communist authorities who accused him of being a spy. "Hearing this priest's story, getting to know him through the visits was really helpful for me," Rubio said. "Thinking about what Christ went through, that really helped me. It made me see that people in my community still cared for me."

**A community 'inside' : Get Involved** - From national to diocesan programs, opportunities abound to answer Jesus' call to visit and minister to those in prison.

- Dismas Ministry: Named after one of the thieves executed with Jesus on Calvary, Dismas Ministry works with prisoners who desire to strengthen their faith lives and come into a deeper relationship with God. The ministry provides an abundance of materials such as Bibles, prayer books and study guides. For more information go to [dismasministry.org](http://dismasministry.org).
- Paulist Prison Ministries: Part of Paulist Evangelization Ministries based out of Washington, D.C., Paulist Prison Ministries relies on chaplains and volunteers to minister to prisoners using a variety of Catholic materials. The ministry is looking for financial support through one-time or continuous donations. More information and copies of its newsletter for prisoners can be found at [prison-ministry.org](http://prison-ministry.org).
- Diocesan efforts: Many dioceses have a Catholic Charities office that supports outreach to prisoners. Check with your local chancery for details.

USCCB statement: Get up-to-speed on Church teaching regarding prison ministry by reading "Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice" written by the U.S. Catholic bishops. The full text can be found at [usccb.org](http://usccb.org).

At San Quentin, Rubio interacted with Jesuits and Dominicans who often visited the prison. He went to daily Mass. He and fellow Catholics at Our Lady of the Rosary Chapel at the prison also prayed the Rosary together. They would often support one another when their parole requests were denied.

"I really haven't seen that kind of community in the outside world," Rubio said. "I've seen pockets of it. As a Church, our faith is more than attending Mass. It's also about being in communion with one another and walking Christ's walk with one another." Woltze said many of the white male prisoners like himself in the Washington state prisons were not comfortable talking about their religion with other people.

Still, even if quietly, thousands of Catholic inmates hunger for spiritual nourishment. Many inmates often write to the Milwaukee, Wis., offices of Dismas Ministry, which provides Bibles and faith study materials, including rosaries and prayer books, in English and Spanish, to inmates across the country.

"For them, in many cases, they don't have anybody they can reach out to," said Ron Zeilinger, who is director of Dismas Ministry. "So when they get something

like a Bible and prayer book, it's gold in their hands. It makes quite an impression. On our feedback forms, we get nice responses and spontaneously written letters on things going on in their spiritual lives.

"It's an honor and a grace to meet them at that level," said Zeilinger, who also visits prisons to participate in prayer services and restorative justice programs. "It's always a touching and profound experience when you meet the men and women, shake their hand, look them in the eye and see their face," Zeilinger said. "It puts a human face on them. The first impression is that these people are just ordinary people. Maybe they've done some stupid or foolish things, but it really is a humbling and human thing to be with them.

"You don't feel threatened, or ill at ease," Zeilinger added. "They're very grateful to have you there. They usually give you a warm reception. They're grateful that someone would come and spend some time with them."

**Transforming lives:** Sister Judith, who is a Eudist Servant of the 11th Hour, said her three-day weekend prison retreats seek to encourage inmates to open their hearts to Christ. The retreat team members present a series of meditations and reflections on God's mercy and the Catholic faith. The retreat ends with Sunday Mass and a personal recognition of each prisoner. "We see conversions that surprise us," she said. "We later find out that some inmates gave up TV because it was leading them into sin. We've also had guys give up pornography. There are just so many beautiful, heart-warming stories. When we go in, we want the men to have a friendship with Jesus."

Joe Martino, a prison minister in Dartmouth, Mass., said he once saw, during a prayer gathering, an inmate hug and forgive another inmate who had shot him on the street. "It was beyond an unbelievable blessing for all of us in the room," said Martino, who is part of a ministry team that visits inmates weekly at the Bristol County House of Corrections in Dartmouth. The ministry - called Residents Encounter Christ - also runs weekend retreats at the r county jail for inmates.

Martino said he has seen inmates move from spiritual desolation and sadness to learning to trust God and other people. "Christ is present in them," he said. "Christ is present in their words, in their tears, in their transformation. We see the face of Christ present in them."

**The next step:** Several prison ministries also seek to help the inmates reintegrate into the community after their release, as well as supporting their families on the

outside. Navin said the Little Rock diocese tries to connect the inmates with the local parish where they will be relocating after release.

"We seem to lose contact with them when they get out, but every once in awhile, they'll call us, usually with a request or questions about how to get a job and housing," he said. "We work with the reentry community to help them out as much as possible."

Deacon Murphy said his ministry also is trying to help in reentry efforts. "When an inmate is released back into society, it's very difficult for them," he said. "They get \$50, and the prisons are out in no-man's land. They spend some of that money just to get into Phoenix. They need to get their Social Security cards, driver's licenses, they need to be taken to job interviews. It's so involved in all kinds of areas. It's a ministry unto itself."