

Prison Ministry: “It is in giving that we receive”

by **Sister Rita K. Kerr, SFP**



Sr. Rita K. Kerr (front row, second from left) with several of the other women who have been with this ministry since this program began.

Several years ago our church bulletin had this announcement: “Volunteers Needed for Prison Ministry.” I decided to see what this was about. We met in the parish hall with Sister Mary Amadeus McKenna, O.P., Pastoral Associate. We call her “Sister Amy.” We were informed that we needed training and an introduction to prison ministry. Our photos were taken and our identities verified. There were several meetings with prison staff with an orientation. We were ready to begin!

My first time passing through the prison gates was difficult; guards were everywhere. We were brought to the chapel and met some prisoners who were attending Sunday liturgy. These are women of all ages, race and cultures. Prison Chaplain Father O’Shea is a wonderful Irish priest with a tremendous sense of humor. One can see that he gives totally in all he does. His well prepared homilies are filled with much humor and are accepted by the women, who respect him. During the homilies he laughs, tells jokes and gets all of us involved in the Liturgy. One of the inmates plays the piano, others sing in the choral group. The women are not shy; during the homily some ask questions and others shout “AMEN.”

The Intercessions give us all a time to pray and ask God’s blessings upon family and friends. The procession at Communion is quite unique. All process to the altar to receive the Eucharist with much devotion and reverence and then most of the women stop to kiss the statue of the Blessed

Mother and Saint Joseph -- a great sign of respect for the Saints. After Liturgy we meet one-on-one with some of the women – it is a good time to get to know each other.

After my first visit, I came home and could not get over the fact that these women are like you and me: intelligent, personable, and quite talented. Yes, their crimes are grave (Bedford Hills is one of five maximum prisons for women in New York State.). On the day we visit I am conscious of how I dress since many of the women have told me, “I enjoy seeing you, Sister and I look forward to seeing what you are wearing each day. I especially do love your hats.”

A grant was given by Sister Amy's Community to host a picnic for the women and their families. On family day all children, moms, dads and grandparents come to visit. There are a number of inmates who do not receive visitors because their families live at a distance or they are rejected by friends and family. We, the volunteers, become their visitors. It is important that we are present to talk and share with them. Sister Amy's Community has also given grants to those women who are released from prison who have no family or have no one to assist them.



"Passage" by Lynda Hoffman-Snodgrass

It is truly a blessed ministry. As it is said in scripture, “Whatsoever you do to the least of my people that you do unto me” and “When I was in prison you visited me.” Looking at our history, our Blessed Mother Frances visited those in prison and was there to pray with them when they were called to die. Let us also remember that we are celebrating the 800th Anniversary of St. Elizabeth of Hungary; she also ministered to the least of His people.

I have been energized by this ministry; it is in giving that we receive. God has given so much to me and in return this small gesture of giving time to the least of His people has been a tremendous force in my love for the prison ministry.