

## Prison Ministry: A Ministry of Presence

By Thomas Lawlor

The most frequently asked question by prospective prison ministry volunteers and other inquiring minds is, “*What* exactly do you do?” The answer to this question varies depending on such factors as time allotted, space considerations, the availability of priests and deacons who are part of the volunteer cadre, and the makeup of the inmate population being ministered to.

The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, preceded by the Sacrament of Reconciliation, is the greatest gift the ministry brings to inmates, superseded only by the administering of the Sacrament of Baptism. Mass and Reconciliation are offered on a regular basis in some institutions, less frequently in others, depending on some of the factors mentioned above. Baptisms are conducted as required. When priests are unavailable, deacons and Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion conduct Eucharistic Services. Bible studies, bible discussions and prayer sessions are generally conducted by deacons and lay volunteers, as are preparation classes for inmates desiring the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation.

It is difficult to conduct organized, ongoing bible study classes in a county jail or juvenile detention center because the inmate populations in these institutions are constantly in a state of flux. The majority of inmates in jail are awaiting trial. After trial they may be remanded back to jail for a limited period of time, are released, or sent off to state prison to serve longer sentences. Basically, they move on pretty quickly. Such is the case with juveniles who, on average, serve even shorter sentences than do adults in jail. So, bible-discussion sessions work best for these inmate populations. With such, the volunteers go in prepared to discuss a given bible passage or set of passages on a related topic, and present the material to the inmates for contemplation and discussion. What scripture tells us about forgiveness, prayer, salvation, faith, the Apostles’ faith journey, etc., are subjects that are generally well received.

Bible study programs are more appropriate for inmates in state prisons, those serving sentences anywhere from a year to life. While the Florida Department of Corrections does transfer inmates periodically from one institution to another, their length of stay at any given facility is generally several years. This enables volunteers to utilize longer term bible study programs and go into the word of God in more detail. It is not uncommon for volunteers to hear from inmates that the sessions are the highlight of their week, something they look forward to very much. It is also not uncommon for interested inmates to get together themselves in groups to study the word of God further during their free time.

Matching the interests, abilities, previous pastoral experiences, knowledge of the faith and times of availability of volunteers, with the needs of various inmate populations, is a bit of a challenge. It is, however, a prerequisite to setting the stage for an effective ministry experience for all concerned. At the outset, each new volunteer in the Diocese of Palm Beach is given a *Prison Ministry Volunteer Manual* designed, among other things, to help them settle into the ministry with greater ease. A significant

portion of the manual is devoted to providing prepared “talks” on the subjects mentioned above and more.

Upon reflection, perhaps the best answer to the question, “*What* exactly do you do?”, is “*We show up!*” It generally takes volunteers a while before they come to understand that often it is not the agenda they planned, or the bible passage(s) selected, that will impact the inmates on any given day. It will be nothing more than their presence. It is through consistent, faithful presence on the part of volunteers that inmates come to see true followers of Christ committed to living the gospel, and bringing His message of love, mercy and forgiveness to others they do not even know at some sacrifice to themselves. For many inmates, that kind of presence doesn’t go unnoticed and is often overpowering. The presence of volunteers is just one of the many ways the Holy Spirit reaches out and touches the hearts of those who are confined behind prison walls, far out of sight of the general population. But the Holy Spirit is always working, there and everywhere.