

# Ministry to the Inmates of Our Prisons and Jails

## Archbishop Michael J. Sheehan, *People of God*, February 2014

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Our new Holy Father, Pope Francis, speaks a great deal about helping the poor and those in difficult situations including inmates in prison. We in the Archdiocese of Santa Fe have a very strong commitment to prison ministry. On January 4, we had Mass and a meeting for those involved in detention ministry. There were a good number of people present for the meeting in which we reviewed the different efforts being made to minister to men and women who are inmates in our prisons and jails. The meeting was hosted by our Pastoral Outreach Office under the direction of Deacon Robert Vigil. He is assigned to diaconal ministry at Sacred Heart Parish in Albuquerque but his full-time job is as Director of Pastoral Outreach for the Archdiocese of Santa Fe. Sr. Josefina Peralta, FdCC also assists greatly in this important ministry to the inmates. She is from the Canossian Religious Community in Albuquerque.

There are presently about 6,600 men and women incarcerated in New Mexico each year. There are about 3,000 who are released each year and the recidivism rate is about 50%! It is indeed sad that once inmates get out of prison they are tempted to go back to their old way of life and the friends they had, many of whom also have criminal histories. The inmates are oftentimes from dysfunctional families with many not being raised by their mother and father. Oftentimes they are dropouts from school and have little employment history. There is also the problem of drugs and alcohol abuse that lead them into a life of crime.

We are trying to help inmates turn their lives around when they come out of prison. We have the Threshold Program by which trained mentors are assigned to inmates to partner with them and to be friends with them and to encourage them towards being practicing Catholics and helping them to not go back to prison. It is, of course, difficult for inmates to get a good job when they get out because many businesses hesitate to hire an ex-convict. It is indeed a challenging situation for them.

We heard from Deacon Andy Dimas and Deacon Andy Carrillo who have been prison chaplains at the State Penitentiary in Santa Fe and who are involved in training mentors and helping connect them with inmates who indeed want to change their lives. We are also very blessed to have the Encuentro at the Los Lunas Prison in which the inmates in minimum security are allowed to go for a weekend of prayer and spiritual exercises, including Mass and confession. Ed Gomez has been one of the leaders in this effort and many of those who are involved in Encuentro do indeed turn their lives around and don't go back to prison. We need to support in every way possible this important ministry to the inmates.

I myself go to the Los Lunas Prison a few days before Christmas to offer three Masses – one for the maximum security, another for the medium security and the third for the minimum security. This year, we had 400 inmates who participated together with some prison guards. Then, on Ash Wednesday, I go with a group of our volunteers to give the ashes to the inmates and staff at the Bernalillo County Metro Detention Center (BCMDC) in Albuquerque. On Good Friday afternoon, I go with a prospective seminarian to the State Penitentiary in Santa Fe to give the Stations of the Cross in each of the 14 pods that are selected. The prospective seminarian carries

my relic of the True Cross and I invite inmates to come forward and kiss the relic of the True Cross and say, "Jesus, I love you." It is a very meaningful thing for the inmates. It is also a powerful experience for the young man with me.

I am very glad there are a good number of people who are involved in detention ministry. After all, they say that 56% of the inmates are either Catholic or have a Catholic background. We have a serious responsibility to help them in their relationship with God. We have priests who go in for confession and Mass at BCMDC and a number of the other prisons as well, including those located in Santa Fe, Clayton, Springer, and Santa Rosa. Please pray for the efforts we are making. We have to do everything we can to strengthen traditional marriage and family life, and to help young people to stay away from criminal activity.