

# Prisoners Share Easter Sunday with Bishop Brom

*By Denis Grasska*

SAN DIEGO — For the second year in a row, Bishop Robert H. Brom celebrated Easter Sunday with Catholic inmates at the R.J. Donovan Correctional Facility, where he celebrated Mass and heard the confessions of prisoners.

According to Father Romeo Gel Supnet, the prison's Catholic chaplain, the inmates appreciated the bishop's visit and seemed receptive to his Easter message of resurrection and salvation.

"The inmates really admired what the bishop had to say to them," Supnet said. "His homily was about their own rising from their past failures, from what they had done in their lives."

Describing Bishop Brom's message as a "tear-jerker," inmate Charles Brose said he appreciated how Bishop Brom stressed the importance of Easter, describing the Church's holiest day in detail, while keeping the message simple enough for those without a firm grounding in Catholic theology.

"I thought it was beautiful that we could come together and celebrate our faith like that," said Brose, who frequently assists Supnet with preparing the chapel for Mass. "It was a real special occasion for us in here."

R.J. Donovan Correctional Facility houses 4,500 male prisoners, incarcerated for felonies ranging from burglary to murder. About 60 people, including inmates, prison staff and warden Robert Hernandez attended the bishop's Mass. According to Hernandez, the inmates in attendance included those with only two- to eight-year sentences, as well as "lifers" who will never be paroled.

The attendance at this year's Mass, Supnet said, was a marked improvement over last year's, when the bishop found only about 10 inmates in the chapel. A "lock-down," imposed in response to an incident on the prison grounds, was in effect at the time and the mobility of inmates was severely restricted.

This year, Bishop Brom called Supnet a week before Easter, offering to preside over all four Easter Masses scheduled at the prison. Though he was glad to welcome the bishop back, Supnet said he only asked the bishop to preside over one Mass, which was to be held in the prison chapel attended by the largest number of Catholics.

Arriving at the prison entrance around 7:30 a.m. Easter morning, the bishop submitted his miter and vestments to inspection by security personnel. Within 15 minutes, he arrived at the designated chapel, where he spoke with several inmates and volunteers. Supnet estimates that the bishop heard the confessions of at least 10 to 15 inmates before Mass in an adjoining room.

Following the Mass, the inmates had the opportunity to speak briefly and have their pictures taken with Bishop Brom.



Supnet, who became Catholic chaplain at R.J. Donovan Correctional Facility in 2001, has been actively involved in prison ministry for 10 years. For him, the most fulfilling aspect of the ministry is watching as people who have reached the lowest point in their lives re-embrace their Catholic faith and begin to turn their lives around.

“For a lot of these inmates, there’s no way down, but there is a way out,” Supnet said. “You can really see the fruits that come from this ministry.”

Supnet is assisted by lay Catholics who call themselves “brown card volunteers,” a reference to the special identification card that allows them to enter the prison independently of Supnet.

Prison ministry volunteers lead bible studies, serve as Eucharistic ministers, exhibit religious films and provide catechism classes, spiritual companionship and interpersonal interviewing to inmates. Their involvement is ongoing, though their time commitment is flexible. Volunteers can visit the prison as infrequently as once a month.

“Without them,” Hernandez said of the volunteers, “this institution would be a lot harder for me and my staff to manage because the volunteers really do reach the hearts of these inmates, helping them build character and integrity.”

According to Gilbert Marquez, an active volunteer for four years, the prison’s Protestant chaplain has full-time volunteers on-site each day. Marquez hopes that an increase in Catholic volunteers will allow Catholics to maintain a constant presence as well.

Potential volunteers must be practicing Catholics, affiliated with a local parish and without a criminal record. They should also be “willing” and “dedicated,” Supnet said, and eager to visit the prison on a regular basis.

“It’s not for everybody,” Marquez said of the prison ministry. “But once you go, you get so much more than you can ever hope to give. It’s just so rewarding.”

For more information on prison ministry, contact Jim Walsh at (858) 490-8375 or visit [www.diocese-sdiego.org/detentionministry](http://www.diocese-sdiego.org/detentionministry).

*The Southern Cross*