

Ministering To Offenders and Victims



Detention ministry is such a polite, delicate term. The word detention implies that someone is being “detained”. Like, “I’ll be detained for a while...” or “sorry I’m late, I was detained” (for 25 years to life)! There are jail and prison facilities called “detention centers”, but Detention Ministry is really all about caring for people who are in jail or prison.

Many people in jail or prison probably deserve to be there. Statutorily or morally, they need to be removed from society for a while. The idea behind jail or prison is that the person is taken out of circulation, held against her or his will, so the law can be fulfilled. Their relationships with the outside become difficult, if not impossible, to maintain. Or their relationships disappear altogether. Their “freedom” is taken away. This is what we imagine happens when someone is “sent to jail”.

But here is what else happens... the vast majority of prisoners initially suffer from extreme anxiety, fear of the unknown... where are they sending me, what’s going to happen next, when do I eat, where do I go to the bathroom, how long will I have to listen to this incessant cursing, this seemingly non-human background noise, yelling and screaming from cells? Many become depressed. I’m in here with murderers and rapists and all I did was...? What happened to the victim of my offense?

Will the people in here hurt me, rape me, kill me? And if someone comes after me, what should I do? I need my spouse, my kids, my Mom, my Dad, my lawyer, my probation officer, my dog, my pajamas, my clothes. Oh my God, what’s going to happen to me... to them... to my victim?

They won’t let me communicate with my friends. My family won’t talk to me. I haven’t had anyone visit me in the eight months I’ve been here. And I just had my 17th birthday yesterday. I have an 18-month-old baby. Who’s taking care of him?

I think the guards hate me. I’d rather be dead than in here. Some inmate has been trying to convince me to worship Satan. Other inmates fight about Scripture interpretation. They tell me I’m going to hell for what I believe. I don’t know what to believe. Does God know I’m here? I don’t deserve all this, no matter what I did.

I've cracked the cell door open a bit for you. I just shared a brief compilation of a few of the things that inmates have shared with Detention Ministry volunteers and me, and those things that I have observed in jails and prisons.

“May the groans of the prisoners reach you; by your great strength save those who are condemned to death.” Psalm 79:11

“The cowering prisoners will soon be set free; they will not die in their dungeon, nor will they lack bread.” Isaiah 51:14

What did Jesus have to say about this? From Luke 4, “He unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it is written: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; therefore he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind and release to prisoners, to announce a year of favor from the Lord.’ Rolling up the scroll he gave it back to the assistant and sat down. And all in the synagogue had their eyes fixed on him. Then he began by saying, ‘Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.’”

“I was in prison and you visited me...” Matthew 25:36

Should we be working to release everyone from jail? Of course not. How does God bring freedom to captives today? Through us! By praying for prisoners, by writing to them, by visiting them they can find freedom in God in a new and merciful way. That's what Detention Ministry is.

There are over 27,000 incarcerated women, men and youth in our diocese in 27 separate “detention facilities”, jails and prisons. Let's say that 9,000 or 10,000 of them have been baptized Catholic. And many offenders have left behind multiple victims. That's a huge parish! There are over 300 active Detention Ministry volunteers in our diocese and a few Catholic chaplains, not nearly enough. Most of them spend an hour or two in a jail once or maybe twice a month. 300 seed sowers planting seeds along someone's path, praying that the seeds fall upon good earth. And praying that while Christ provides the light, someone else will fertilize, someone else will prune.

Bishop Brom celebrated Easter Mass with the men in R. J. Donovan State Prison in Otay Mesa. Many of us in Detention Ministry prayed for him, the prisoners and the prison staff. Paul told us to “remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.” Hebrews 13:3

If these words plant a seed in your consciousness, if they move you to say a prayer for the boys and girls, women and men who are caught in the profane, dehumanizing agony of “detention” or for their victims, they will have served their intent.

Detention Ministry is part of Restorative Justice which includes victim ministry, support for friends and family of the incarcerated, inmate re-entry work, victim/offender dialogue, and more.

For more information contact the Restorative Justice Program at the Diocese of San Diego at 858-490-8375 and my email is jwalsh@diocese-sdiego.org

“Then someone came and said, ‘Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people.’” Acts 5:25

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