

Bishop Celebrates Mass at Metropolitan Correctional Center



By Denis Grasska

SAN DIEGO -- Following his Easter visit to R.J. Donovan Correctional Facility, Bishop Robert H. Brom recently made history as the first San Diego bishop to celebrate Mass with Metropolitan Correctional Center inmates.

During the bishop's Mass on April 10, the prison chapel was filled to capacity, with 45 inmates, three lay Catholic volunteers and three prison staff members, including associate warden Maureen Cruz.

"It was really an honor for us to have the bishop here," said Msgr. Fernando Gutierrez,

the prison's Catholic chaplain. "It was an honor and a great privilege."

According to Father Gutierrez, at least half of the prison's inmates are baptized Catholics.

Bishop Brom arrived at the prison early for the Mass, which began at 8 a.m. and lasted a few minutes less than a full hour. He found the inmates already waiting in the prison chapel when he arrived.

The bishop made himself available for photos both before and after the Mass. Both inmates and staff members scrambled to have their pictures taken with the spiritual leader of San Diego's Catholic community.

Though the bishop read from the English translation of the liturgy, several segments of the Mass were presented in Spanish because of the large number of Spanish-speaking inmates in attendance. Most of the songs, as well as the second reading, the Gospel introduction and the bishop's pre-Eucharist prayer for peace, were in Spanish. The first reading, responsorial psalm and the Gospel itself were in English.

In his homily, Bishop Brom told the inmates that the resurrected Christ is present in today's world, but that the Holy Spirit's assistance is needed to recognize his presence in themselves and in others. According to Father Gutierrez, the bishop made the homily an interactive experience, posing questions to his audience and encouraging the inmates to complete his sentences with the correct answers.

After the Mass, inmates approached Father Gutierrez and expressed their appreciation for the bishop's visit and their hope that he would return. But while the inmates were "awed by his presence," Father Gutierrez said, some were puzzled as to why the bishop decided to come. He explained that the bishop was simply exercising his pastoral duty to visit one of the many religious communities within his diocese.

"The prison is still a part of the Universal Church and sometimes people forget that fact," Gutierrez said. "But the bishop's visit makes it clear that the Church is not limited to those outside the prison walls."

But despite their passion for the work, Father Gutierrez said, "I can count on my fingers the number of Catholic volunteers I have." Only about five or six volunteers currently assist him at the prison. He hopes to increase their numbers to at least 10.

“It has to be emphasized among parishioners that the prison ministry may sound scary, but it’s not,” Father Gutierrez said. “Parishioners should reach out beyond their parishes. This is one of the outreach ministries they can do.”

A prison minister for almost four years, catechism volunteer Henry Wilson considers the ministry an investment in the future of both the Church and the country.

“Someday, they’re going to be turned loose,” Wilson said, “and I’d rather they be turned loose with a good grounding in their faith than for them to just walk out the door with whatever they learned in that prison.

“One thing Msgr. Gutierrez said is, ‘One day, I don’t want to see any Catholics in here.’ I said, ‘Well, we’re working on it, monsignor. We’re working on it.’”

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

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