

Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy
Visiting the Imprisoned
by: Rev. Raymond Cotter
4th in a series– Diocese of Gaylord



The Corporal Work of Mercy, visiting the imprisoned, gets special attention this year on Palm Sunday. It comes within the reading of the Passion according to Luke. We possibly hear the last conversation Christ had before His death on the cross. He speaks to the only repentant prisoner crucified alongside of him. Christ assures the man, "Amen I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise." Luke 23:43

Christ had a lot of conversations in His earthly life within much preaching and teaching, but possibly his last words were of mercy. The man alongside of him on the cross was brought out of prison for execution. Christ preached about visiting the imprisoned, and His companion at death highlighted it.

Dismas Ministry, hosted by the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, has numerous programs of prayer, study, and action that can be undertaken to engage visiting the imprisoned. Dismas has been the legendary name assigned to the good thief on the cross. Dismas Ministry lays out resources in actually visiting prisons and facilitating programs within such experiences. The reflective prayers on the site can assist in keeping inmates in your thoughts and prayers. Monies can also be donated for the cost of materials going into prisons across the country.* (dismasministry.org)

The Diocese of Gaylord has numerous county jails and two state prisons that can always use some special attention within the visiting mandate of the work of mercy. Significant consideration has to be given on procedures for visiting the incarcerated.

COUNTY JAILS

Always work within an established group, i.e. from a parish, that can best facilitate visits. Some of our counties have no jails, but house offenders in a nearby county that can complicate the initiative. Visitation will always have restrictions on time and who is allowed to visit a prisoner

STATE PRISONS / Michigan Department of Corrections -MDOC (see website)

Our Diocese has two male prisons: Pugsley Correctional Facility SE of Kingsley (25 miles from Traverse City) and the Oaks Facility, just several miles north of Manistee. They can have up to nearly 2,000 prisoners at five different levels of felons. A prisoner can often be moved to another prison in the state and his level (rating) can be reduced in being prepared for release.

The fellows very much value their time at Mass, prayer, and studies with volunteers who go into the two prisons. They easily say they would never choose not to attend the weekly Mass! "High light of our week". They could be outside enjoying recreation during the limited yard time that coincides with Mass. In that regard, I was slow in an observation about their few choices within their blue and orange attire. "How come the guys in the yard can wear shorts?" I was quickly told that state prison rules do not allow shorts at a religious service! Our parishioners could learn from their priorities and dress style!

It has been very complicated to visit state prisoners. However, the MDOC has recently created a more expansive visitation program under "special activities" that can be applied for from their state headquarters in Lansing.**

A favorite priest mentor of mine in prison ministry was Fr. Frank Lawlor of Ohio who I met at a parish I belonged to in Columbus. We became friends possibly because we were absolute opposites! He was so reserved and introverted! He was not overly acclaimed at the parish and that might have attracted me to him. In a light hearted away, his homilies “dragged” on!

While later living in Tulsa, I contacted him to write a required letter of reference on my behalf as I sought to return to the seminary. He came up north to visit me during my seminary studies. I only went south to visit him once in that time frame and that was for his funeral. It was my first priest funeral and likely will be the smallest priest funeral I ever attend. On his way to visit prisoners at the Federal Prison in Marion, Ohio, he had a massive heart attack on the roadside.

Christ had one prisoner alongside of him as he prepared to die. I have no doubt that Fr. Lawlor would have had a few hundred at his funeral had it been possible.



*We need few monies for supplies at our two prisons. We have donors already covering most of our dispensing of St. Joseph Sunday Missals – a CHERISHED item. Monies needed for books and religious subscriptions can arise. Such materials must come DIRECTLY from the publishing house. I would urge you to check with an individual parish with possible needs the local county jail.

** In the past, visitation at a state prison was allowed only after an inmate would put together his limited list of ten visitors. Complicated. Clergy could visit anyone. BUT now a major upgrade has taken place within the expansive MDOC rules. An individual can apply to state headquarters and after clearance, can visit any prisoner in any state prison.

I can imagine that folks, men and women, living near Pugsley or the Oaks, might want to consider such an activity following within the Corporal Work of Mercy. There are prisoners who have not had a SINGLE visitor in 20 years+! With other visitors and within limited hours, the visits take place in a large and highly supervised room. People can be found playing checkers, enjoying a rare vending machine treat, or just sharing stories of your family and his. There are some restrictions and wisdom that volunteers can supply. You do not make an appointment, but rather simply show up at scheduled visiting hours and surprise him with a “call out”. Christ and the inmate would be most grateful.

Fritz Sutter, famous within a recent article in Gaylord Diocese FAITH magazine, can be contacted for visits to the Oaks and myself for Pugsley. The state application will be explained. We volunteers can choose an ideal inmate. We would inform him of your upcoming visit – never let him down by not following through. We would protect you from the wrong guy. You never ask a guy WHY he is in, however a state website does exist that can tell you that. I never look.

May this Jubilee Year of Mercy draw us closer to the Gospel Truths so as to live life in abundance!

Fr. Ray Cotter, Christ the King in Acme, 231-938-9214.

Fr. Peter Wigton or Fritz Sutter through the Manistee Catholic Community, 231-723-2619.