

Ministry team reaches out to Elmira Correctional Facility inmates

By Mike Myers
Southern Tier Correspondent

The Church is alive behind the red brick walls of Elmira Correctional Facility.

One of the "corporal works of mercy" named in the Baltimore Catechism is visiting the imprisoned. In the Southern Tier of this diocese, the official representatives to the imprisoned are the ministry team of Father Edward Golden, Sister Josepha Twomey and Mr. Michael Stanley.

To enter their parish, you have to walk through a series of clanging iron doors, past signs for visitors that leave no reason for doubt that this is a prison. "Any article given to an inmate without the permission of the superintendent or his designee will be considered contraband," reads one inscription. Correction officers stand at every turn.

Even in this atmosphere, Father Golden and his team manage to run a parish. "Basically, everything is the same as in an ordinary parish. We teach, heal and sanctify," says Father Golden. Liturgy, teaching, religious education, healing and the sacraments — reconciliation, Eucharist, baptism, anointing and even an occasional confirmation — are all conducted behind the prison's walls. Father Golden hasn't had occasion for confirmation during his two-and-one-half years in prison work, but says prisoners have been confirmed in past years.

About 10 percent of the population at the Elmira Correctional Facility falls under the team's jurisdiction, with Protestant ministers, Jewish rabbis and Islamic imams each ministering to their respective segments of the population.

Father Golden says the team approach to

prison ministry in this diocese was initiated in Elmira. The inclusion of a woman and a layman to minister to prisoners was a new idea when it began. He finds Sister Josepha, a woman ministering to men in a time of crisis," particularly effective. One of the team's tasks is to communicate bad news to the inmates, and Sister Josepha is often able to help at a time of loss and grief.

Father Golden, ordained in 1961, was assigned to parishes in Rochester and a mission in La Paz, Bolivia, before accepting the position at the Elmira prison. He said he came to the prison when it "was getting time for another assignment. I speak Spanish. I consider myself an open, non-judgmental person, and it's an important place for the Church to be."

Sister Josepha has been in the prison ministry for seven years. She had worked previously for the diocesan Office of Human Development, and held teaching positions in Rochester and Dansville.

Michael Stanley, who has a master's degree in theology from St. Bernard's Institute, worked in religious education in the Ithaca area before coming to Elmira.

Father Golden is also involved in drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs, and ministers to the Spanish-speaking population. Stanley runs religious education programs, including Bible study, in both the correctional facility and the reception center, and interviews and counsels prisoners in the correctional areas.

Sister Josepha is the team member primarily involved in family ministry. For inmates locked away from their families, she acts as a conduit to and from those left behind. "Right now, there's a guy in Arnot Ogden hospital. She's keeping in contact

with the family," notes Father Golden.

The Elmira Correctional Facility is divided into three basic sections. The Reception Center classifies incoming, newly sentenced prisoners assignment to high-, medium- or minimum-security facilities. Prisoners usually remain in the reception area for six to eight weeks.

The reception population usually runs about 400. The correctional facility itself, a maximum-security prison, normally has about 1,300 inmates, and Camp Monterey in Schuyler County, a minimum-security facility, houses those inmates who are usually young, close to parole and well-behaved.

Within Elmira there is a "special housing" area, one of Father Golden's primary interests. This unit houses prisoners who need protective custody because they are too small or timid to cope with the rest of the prison population, as well as those who have run afoul of other prisoners and need to be guarded from reprisals. Disruptive prisoners are placed in another special area, the guard room.

Despite the incidence at the prison of riots and murders, the team "doesn't have any sense we're in danger," says Father Golden. "We get a great deal of respect from the guards and prisoners. We know it's there (the danger), but we don't feel any anxiety or tension. There never has been a problem."

But there are differences between the prison community and ordinary parishes. As Father Golden points out, "It's different from anything on the street — cell blocks and cell living. At different points, the need is different. As men come into reception, there's a natural tendency to seek out religion for reasons of repentance, fear and uncer-

tainty as to the future."

The long-term prisoners find that church services represent a time away from cell life, in an environment like that of the outside population. "I'm aware that people have different reasons for coming to church," he continues, "but overall, I think it's sincere. I think it's worthwhile to provide good liturgy, so that whatever the motivation, Christ will come to them. In a parish outside, how can you measure the results of ministry? I've seen people change in a complete about-face. I see them mostly in a prison environment, free from the drugs and alcohol they've renounced, and they appear to be very prayerful and Christian in their attitudes and actions."

Nonetheless, Father Golden says he doesn't know what happens to the prisoners when they're released from prison and are exposed once again to temptations. "A lot of good things happen here," he says, speaking of men in need and the way in which their fellow inmates can help in a time of loss. He also notes that inmates have contributed to efforts to combat world hunger and to the needs of people in the Elmira community.

Community members too, he finds, often return the favor. Volunteers who run Residents Encounter Christ, a spin-off of the Cursillo movement, bring something special to the inmates, Father Golden says, adding that some parishes collect and donate books for inmates.

Parishes on the outside can do a lot for prisoners, Father Golden concludes, by maintaining constant contact with them as they go through the correctional system, and providing some kind of hospitality when the prisoners finally return home.

Annual Craft Show

Good Shepherd Church's Twelfth Annual Craft Show will be November 11, 9 a.m. to 7 p.m., at the church on East Henrietta Road.

More than 100 craft booths will be offered, along with free babysitting, parking and admission.

Memorial Mass, Brunch

A memorial mass and brunch will be sponsored Sunday, Nov. 10, by the Catholic Women's Club.

Mass will be 11 a.m. at the Carmelite Monastery, 1931 Jefferson Road, followed by Brunch at Locus Hill Country Club, 2000 Jefferson Road.

Reverend Sebastion V. Falcone, president

Jeans Dance

Aquinas Parents Association and Aquinas Institute are sponsoring a "Jeans Dance," Friday, Nov. 1, in the Aquinas cafeteria, 7:30 p.m. to 1 a.m..

The dance is for parents, faculty, alumni and friends of Aquinas.

Reservations must be returned to Aquinas main office. Cost is \$5 per person.

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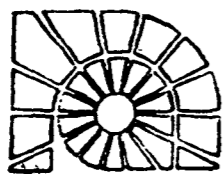
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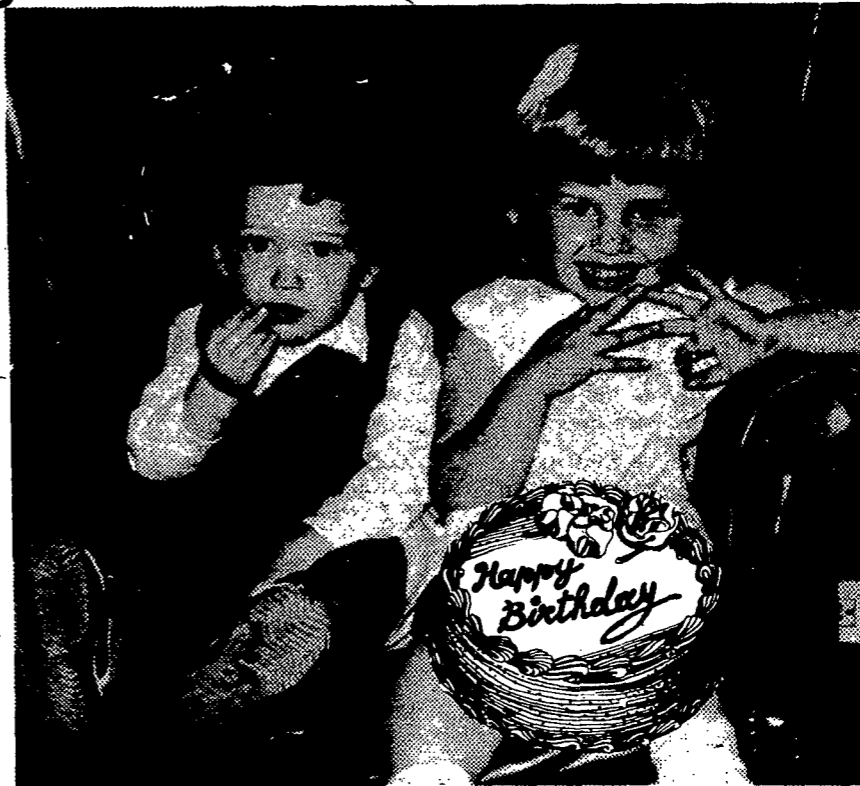


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