



Bishop Slattery visits inmates of the Dick Conner Correctional Center on Holy Thursday, April 5.

Praying for the unloved and abandoned

By DEACON BILL DUNBAR

Editor's note: This is an edited version of a homily Deacon Bill Dunbar has delivered at several parishes in The Diocese of Tulsa.

We are told by Our Lord to love one another. That is the basis of all of our corporal works of mercy, to love one another.

I never thought I'd end up in prison, but that is exactly what happened. Several years ago, I was approached about getting involved with prison ministry and was invited to an informational meeting about an upcoming Kairos weekend at the prison in Hominy.

My curiosity got me hooked.

Although I had no idea what would happen on a prison weekend, eventually I realized that God was leading me into prison ministry. I had been traveling to McAlester for the past 10 years to the execution prayer vigils, and now, after nearly 40 executions, God was giving me a more direct way to minister to the imprisoned.

On Oct. 20, 2000, I attended my first Kairos weekend at the Dick Conner Correctional Center. Since this is one of the state's medium-security prisons, I was kind of apprehensive on the day of the prisoners' arrival. As murderers and rapists and the like came into the gymnasium, which was to become our community home for the next four days, I could see members from all the various prison-yard gangs here together for maybe the first time.

You could see the anger in their eyes and could feel the tension in the air as they saw their enemies in the same room. Forty-two prisoners filled that room for a program that began on Thursday evening and ended on Sunday night with a closing ceremony. If any

of us only knew what was soon to transpire, we would have been overwhelmed in thanks to God for bringing us all together.

The Kairos weekend is a highly structured but spirit-filled program of talks, discussions, singing and prayer that creates the dynamics for powerful, life-changing experiences. It was amazing to witness the gradual transformation that occurred in these hardened criminals. Hearts softened, walls were torn down and tears were shed as they accepted Christ into their lives. It was an awesome experience.

We truly became a family for that weekend, even eating our meals together. Our outside team prepares at least one meal per day, brings them into the facility and feeds the prisoners a feast. Our other meals are eaten in the prison's chow hall.

For many inmates, this is their first time to sit down to a meal with a family. Imagine that. Mid-afternoon on Saturday, following a chapel program, the men are sent back to our community room and, waiting for them at the table, they find a personalized bag filled with letters from each of the Kairos team members and other people who have been invited to write letters. Stillwater religious education classes wrote more than



Deacon Bill Dunbar

100 letters to be given to the prisoners.

Clergy are the only team members allowed to be in the room as the prisoners open their letters. The experience is overpowering for most of them, especially when they receive letters from kids.

Sunday activities continue to draw the inmates closer to God and help them to open up their hearts to the loving and forgiving power of Christ. By the end of the weekend, a dramatic, life-changing experience has taken place. This change has proven to greatly lower the incidence of the inmates' re-entry into the prison system once they have been released.

After Kairos, we follow up and help them establish prayer groups within the prison so they can continue their experience long after the weekend is over.

Working with prisoners may not be what some people feel they are called to. After all, most are criminals and social outcasts and they deserve what they get. Right?

They also are human beings and children of God. They are still someone's parent, spouse, sibling, child and friend. It is possible to love the sinner without condoning the sin. Many prisoners have never been loved, and most have been abandoned by their families. Some will be released one day and may move into your neighborhood. Wouldn't it be nice to know that they have experienced a true change of heart and want to live a productive life?

How would our lives differ if we had been abandoned and unloved?

Deacon Bill Dunbar, ordained to the permanent diaconate in 2001, is assigned to the parishes of Stillwater and prison ministry.



Death-row inmate David Woods holds his cat, Jasper Moon, in his cell while receiving a visit from Deacon Malcolm Lunsford and his wife, Shirley, at Indiana State Prison in Michigan City in late February. Mr. Woods, who was convicted of first-degree murder for the 1984 slaying of his neighbor, was executed May 4. (CNS photo)



A death-row inmate at Indiana State Prison in Michigan City, Ind., receives communion from a visiting deacon in late February. (CNS photo)

Prison ministry is 'mission of Christianity'

By AMANDA WILLIAMS

Since Deacon Bill Dunbar, assigned to St. John and St. Francis Xavier Churches in Stillwater became director of prison ministry for the Diocese of Tulsa in 2003, his perspective on the imprisoned has changed.

"When I first started prison ministry four years ago, I was of the mindset 'lock them up and throw away the key.' Now, some of my best friends are inmates."

Bishop Edward J. Slattery also has noted the common public attitude of showing no concern for those who are imprisoned but also said: "Sanctity is meant for everybody, and our prisons are filled with potential saints. As long as you're breathing, you can become a saint. It doesn't matter what you have done in the past, your gender or your age."

Bishop Slattery said the lack of compassion for inmates is "an indictment against our system that we don't really rehabilitate anybody in prison; we don't even pretend to do that anymore."

As director, Deacon Dunbar works with prison chaplains to bring evangelization and celebration of faith behind prison walls. One of the primary events of prison ministry is Kairos, a weekend retreat that leads participants through prayer while sharing faith and building community. The most recent Kairos was held at Cimarron Correctional Center in Cushing April 29.

As is his custom, Bishop Slattery celebrated Holy Thursday Mass with inmates at Dick Conner Correctional Center in Hominy, where he washed the feet of 12 prisoners, symbolizing Christ washing His disciples' feet. The Bishop said, "This one gesture communicated the entire mission of Christianity."

In his homily at Holy Family Cathedral Easter Sunday, Bishop Slattery told the congregation about his prison visit and how "on my way home, I felt very humble that I, a sinner, a Bishop, who goes to confession" had washed the men's feet. "The humility of these prisoners has left a lingering impact on me."

Many hands help foster the work of prison ministry, whether they are celebrating Mass, folded in prayer, holding a hand or baking cookies. Many parishioners in the Diocese want to help their brothers and sisters in faith and find creative ways to do so.

The Women's Club of St. Anne Church in Broken Arrow has baked tens of thousands of cookies for Kairos retreats for more than five years, said parishioner Mary Jones.

In addition to the Stillwater parishes, St. Patrick Church in Sand Springs and Our Lady of the Lake Church in Mannford participate in a pen pal program, matching parishioners with inmates. Deacon Dunbar gives pen pals an orientation to familiarize them with what it is acceptable to write about – and what they should not.

In the past, EOC readers have donated Catholic books in response to a request an inmate wrote in a letter to the editor. The response from the Catholic community was so overwhelming, a Conner Corrections inmate said April 5, he had to stop accepting the packages because of strict prison regulations regarding possessions and distributions.

Deacon Dunbar said the ministry's most critical need is to purchase fifth-wheel trailers, which are used to transport supplies to the prisons for various visits and Kairos retreats. The current trailers can only be moved with a semi truck, and Deacon Dunbar said it is hard to coordinate moving them with the availability of volunteers who have semis.

He said \$53,000 would pay for trailers that can be moved by a pick-up truck, which many more volunteers have. So far, Deacon Dunbar has raised \$5,000. Contributions can be mailed to him at St. John the Evangelist Church, 201 North Knoblock, Stillwater, OK 74075.

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