

Prison ministry: 'Looking for something good to do'

JESSUP - It was like any other Easter weekend, as Bishop Mitchell T. Rozanski anointed adult confirmandi with chrism oil and proclaimed, "Be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit!"

It was unlike any other celebration in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, as the 40 worshippers at the Maryland Correctional Institution for Women were adorned not in spring pastels, but state-issue sweatshirts.

Visitors are allowed on days of the month that correspond to inmates' identification numbers, odd or even. It being March 31, and unfair to tip that balance in favor of the odds, there were no visitors this Easter Sunday, a restriction that intensified the sense of community.

"I feel renewed, encouraged," said Stacey Shirey of Kent Island, serving 10 years for burglary, consecutive to four years for drug possession. "I am taking this time to let God transform my heart. I am so grateful. I can't imagine going through here without them."

She nodded toward Ray Ogden, a parishioner of nearby St. Lawrence Martyr in Jessup who helped prepare Shirey and Terri Russell-Isner, the other convert, who, like her, had been baptized as a child in the Episcopal church.

Shirey was also referencing Mike Krainak, a Howard County parishioner who provided the music on his guitar, and the women who supply spiritual direction throughout the week, such as MCIW chaplain Lettie Carr, Holy Cross Sister Ann Shaw and Angela Burrin, who brings holy Communion when a priest isn't available and copies of "The Word Among Us," a Catholic magazine.

Inmates are also familiar with Father Victor Scocco and the other Trinitarians who staff St. Lawrence Martyr. Only on Christmas and Easter do they see Bishop Rozanski, who visited three days after Pope Francis took the Mass of the Lord's Supper not to a Rome basilica, but a juvenile detention facility.

"I'm grateful that he has highlighted that the Gospel message needs to be preached everywhere," Bishop Rozanski said. "The Catholic Church is charged to be everywhere, and especially among the poor, the helpless and the imprisoned."

Holy Thursday was not the pope's first visit behind bars, nor is the MCIW ministry novel in the archdiocese.

When Bishop Rozanski was ordained to the episcopate in 2004, he took on the MCIW ministry of his predecessor, Bishop William Newman. Deacon Seigfried Pressberry is the director of prison ministry for the archdiocese, and Father Chuck Canterna is a

full-time prison minister in the city.

According to Carr, the MCIW chaplain, last week it numbered 777 inmates, with the possibility that some could be as young as 14 “if they were charged as an adult.” Her office ministers to Christians, Jews, Muslims and those of other persuasions.

Carr counted 13 different faith services Easter Sunday, the largest being held in the gymnasium, amid exercise equipment. There is solitude in prison but little privacy, as a flushing toilet and the chatter emanating from a prison guard’s walkie-talkie competed with the consecration.

The holy water was in a plastic container. Bishop Rozanski said the priest is allowed to bring through security just over an ounce of wine for his personal consumption, “enough to make the Mass valid.” He packs plenty of hope, which is buttressed by volunteers such as Krainak and Ogden, who was “looking for something good to do” when he retired.

Kerri King, of Cecil County, said that Ogden was “the one who gave me my indigent pack” of toiletries in 2009, when she began serving 10 years for vehicular manslaughter, with a consecutive 5 years for leaving the scene and 1 year for DUI. King said she feels blessed to spend 1-on-1 time with Sister Ann, the Holy Cross nun who works as a counselor three days a week at MCIW.

“This gives me a sense of community, also a sense of healing,” King said before Easter Sunday Mass. “It lets me know that God is still there, and that he forgives me for what happened.”

See also:

Sister unlocks hope for women in jail

Paul McMullen is managing editor of the Catholic Review.