



Promoting the Glory of God Through Prison Ministry

By Craig Gibson, Chair, American Association Prison Ministry Committee

PRISON MINISTRY AND SANCTIFICATION

“The mission of the American Association of the Order of Malta is the promotion of the glory of God through the sanctification of its members, witness to and support of the Catholic faith, and active service to the sick and the poor.

— *The 2019 American Association Strategic Plan – A Roadmap for the Future*

Prison Ministry provides tremendous opportunity to promote the glory of God through our members' sanctification. It's easy to care for those we deem worthy. It takes a different level of compassion to reach out to those who have fallen from our spiritual or civic ideals. And yet, which of our fellow human beings need us more than those struggling to find the way home? And given that need, where are we more likely to discover our own path toward greater spirituality?

2020 REVIEW

At the end of 2019, Bob Fredericks, who had led and helped grow Prison Ministry for 14 years, retired as Chair of the American Association Prison Ministry Committee. Recognized by the Grand Master for his work, Bob has played a significant role in nurturing Prison Ministry to become active in all three United States Associations as well as in Canada. I have the honor of succeeding Bob and have been working with the New York office staff, our Prison Ministry Area Coordinators, and our members participating in the ministry to conduct a comprehensive review of the program. We are now seeking ways to expand the activity and create efficiencies. I would like to share with you the work we are doing and encourage you to join us in this uplifting ministry.

OUR WORK

Throughout the American Association, we have 28 Prison Ministry programs

within 13 Areas. Just over 185 of our regular members and almost 70 auxiliary members participate. Our work falls into five categories:

- **Visitation and Outreach—Being Present Inside the Walls:** This is the largest direct contact we have through Prison Ministry. Our members and chaplains visit inmates to participate in the Liturgy, provide support and fellowship, pray the rosary together, conduct weekend retreats, provide spiritual direction, lead Bible Study, bring books purchased from local library book sales, and share an overall sense of fellowship.
- **Re-entry—Helping to Rebuild Lives:** At the point inmates are leaving incarceration, our members provide mentoring, assistance with locating housing and higher education, and help with job searches.
- **Bible and Prayer Book Distribution—Bringing the Word of God:** We provide bibles and prayer books to inmates, offering the opportunity for spiritual nourishment and growth in the spirit.
- **The Pen Pal Program—Supporting From a Distance:** Many of our members participate in the Pen Pal Program, a secure way to visit. From a distance, our members develop connections to prisoners, often the only connection an inmate may have to the outside world.

IMPORTANCE OF PRISON MINISTRY

“By providing to its members sufficient opportunities to give witness to and support the Catholic faith and to care for the sick and the poor, its members will have enriched their lives and the lives of those they serve, and will have made significant progress in achieving their spiritual goals.”

— *Vision Statement: The 2019 American Association Strategic Plan – A Roadmap for the Future*

The work we do as members of the Order of Malta supports those in need and deepens our own spirituality. Bill

Mattison's response to his work in Prison Ministry reflects that ideal: "I drive to the prison, but I fly home," he said, speaking of the good feeling he gets from the visits. Bill has been a member of the Order of Malta for 35 years and has worked in Prison Ministry for 15. The Liturgy and fellowship are all components of his weekly visits to prisons in Florida, where Bill gets as much out of the experience as he gives. "I get more emotional fulfillment in supporting these prisoners than from almost anything else on earth. Helping these men understand how the Gospel affects their lives deepens my own understanding of the Gospel and helps me grow in faith."

Fran Buckley has been visiting women prisoners over the past 10 years, mostly in upstate New York. "Our ministry is one of presence," she said. "We visit, listen, and pray." She said she didn't go into the work for any type of return, but the return is absolutely there. "We do it because the Lord has commissioned us to love our neighbor, to feed the hungry, to visit the imprisoned. We're giving praise to God by doing what He has commissioned us to do. And that helps my own spirituality, the spirituality of all of us working in Prison Ministry."

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

With so many programs throughout our Areas, it is difficult to talk about all of them. We recommend you look at the Spirituality in Action Resource Book in the member section of our website to get a sense of the true scope of our work. The following are a few representative samples.

- Naples Jail Center, Naples, Florida: A wonderful example of our visitation work is the program serving Naples Jail Center in East Naples, Florida. Members of the Order visit weekly, seeing men and women on separate days. Our members hold prayer services; give out Communion; hand out weekly prayers; coordinate the provision of bibles, prayer books and

rosaries; and coordinate the hearing of Confession.

- Let's Start Prison Ministry, St. Louis, Missouri: Through the Let's Start Prison Ministry program, our members work with formerly incarcerated women and their children to assist in recovery and reentry. Our members hold a weekly support group; provide Malta Bibles, items for personal care, and household goods; and, through the generosity of members of the Order, arrange monthly bus trips for children, along with their caregivers, to visit their mothers in prison. Every third week they provide a full dinner for up to 50 women and children.
- Prison Pen Pals, Norwalk, Connecticut: While the Pen Pal program supports inmates from a distance, our members who participate in the program in the Norwalk, Connecticut area, have created a way to support one another. These members gather quarterly for fellowship and friendship. Along with a dinner of pizza, there is time for prayer and reflection upon their shared experience as well as questions.

GETTING INVOLVED

"You must think about interior renewal and hope to begin again. Every penalty must be open to the horizon of hope."

— Pope Francis: Good Friday 2020

At the Stations of the Cross by Prisoners

- As an Individual: If your Area has a Prison Ministry Program, we encourage you to talk to your Area Coordinator to discover opportunities to participate. Whether you feel the call to be part of the ministry of presence inside the walls, are more comfortable in the Pen Pal program, or believe you can make a difference in the reentry process, you will find the work rewarding on so many levels.
- As an Area: Many of our Areas do not yet have Prison Ministry programs. We would be happy to help you set one up. Email me at cbgibson@comcast.net to get started. Or check out the Spirituality in Action Resource Book, where you will find descriptions of other Prison Ministry programs. I'm sure any one of the Area Chairs would be delighted to talk to you about the ministry in their Area. ■

