



“A National Catholic Outreach supporting the spiritual lives and rehabilitation of prisoners.”

Finding the Poorest of the Poor in Prison

By Tyler Curtis

With St. Louis, Missouri as the backdrop, Sr. Rose Rita Huelsmann, SSND, has dedicated her life to teaching young students and guiding adults amidst myriad challenges. As an educator and counselor, she bears witness to the obstacles faced by those she has served both inside and outside the classroom – and prison.

“I almost always taught in city schools that were very integrated and located in high-crime areas,” said Sr. Rose Rita. “I work with the poor and I am flexible enough to do that. My purpose to work with the poor is to look for the Gospel. The poor hold the Gospel.”

She spent the first 40 years of her career as an administrator and teacher. “When I hung up my chalk in formal education, I thought I would teach reading and writing to the incarcerated. Instead, it was 14 years in prison ministry,” she explained.

Her specialty in prison ministry turned out to be an anger management class for those inside and parolees. She worked first within parole and probation guidelines. After that, she said, “the rest was left to me and the Spirit as you go.”

In the Archdiocese of St. Louis, there are four prisons and 14 jails. While not all of the jails permitted visitors, some programs were allowed in the prisons. In 1979, Fr. John Vogler and Sr. Pius Fagan, O.P. started the agency of Criminal Justice Ministry (CJM) in the diocese as a way of coordinating the efforts in prison ministry. In the mid-1970s, as the war on drugs started and the prison population exploded, the need for ministers increased.

“My main focus was program implementation in the four prisons, particularly the one where death row inmates are mixed in with the general population,” she said, adding that in 2002 CJM shifted its focus to housing and programming for people coming out of prison.

After a three-month sabbatical in 2004, Sr. Rose Rita transitioned from teaching in a traditional classroom with many students to preparing for one-to-one ministry in a very different environment. Her training at CJM was provided through the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, whose charism is to see the face of Christ in everyone you serve “from the king to the pauper.”

“This is what makes it possible to sit with the murderer. They are brother and sister. What they did on a bad day – it’s not who they are,” she said, adding that the Vincentian training helped her grow. “Our charism, the School Sisters of Notre Dame, is *making one*. All of this fits together. We are one.”

While living and ministering in the same urban area for decades, it was bound to happen, she said: “I’ve met some of my students inside. One woman recognized me during a prison prayer service, and when she approached me and introduced herself, she said, ‘I’m so sorry, Sister.’ She was ashamed that I would find her inside.” [Continued on p. 3](#)



Sr. Rose Rita Huelsmann, SSND

“It’s openness to God looking like you don’t expect God to look.”

From the Director

Dear Friends,

We are several weeks into a new year and I am hopeful. Though the “newness” of 2021 may be gone, the idea of what’s possible propels me forward in my life and work this year.

While 2020 had its share of challenges, and heartaches for us all, it reminded me to be grateful for everyone and everything I hold dear. It renewed my commitment to help those in need.

With your help, that is what we do at Dismas Ministry – every day of the year. Through your prayerful and financial support, you reach prisoners who live on the margins. I am grateful for you, and the gifts you share to bring hope and healing to them, their victims and the families of both.

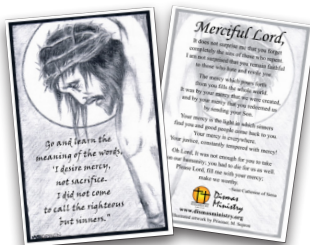
Despite the obstacles that can get in the way...together, we will rise up and continue this shared mission to serve our brothers and sisters behind bars. In the words of St. Francis of Assisi: Let us begin again...

With gratitude,

Ms. Tyler Curtis
Executive Director



All occasion cards



Prayer card

Join Our Monthly Giving Club

Join our giving club – Mercy Circle – and commit to a monthly gift.

Your prayerful and generous support sustains Dismas Ministry’s mission of providing Catholic scripture, faith and prayer resources to the imprisoned. Together, with your partnership, we help strengthen lives of faith for those seeking God’s love and mercy.

Mercy Circle members will receive these benefits:

- monthly updates from the Executive Director
- recognition in the *Remember Me* newsletter (with permission)
- all occasion cards (set of 5) featuring artwork of prisoners
- special prayer card

To learn more, visit www.dismasministry.org/mercycircle

Prayer for Prison Staff, Victims of Crime and Inmates

O God, protect and guide those who work in our prisons. Comfort and heal all victims of crime.

Help them attain peace by imitating Your power to forgive. Look with mercy on those who are incarcerated. Fill the hearts of all inmates with courage, peace and the desire to reform.

Let those who guard, protect, teach, and minister to them do so with justice built on compassion.

Free political prisoners and all those who are imprisoned unjustly. Grant this through Jesus who was unjustly condemned but now lives and reigns with You forever and ever.

Amen.

Finding the Poorest of the Poor in Prison continued...

Now in retirement, Sr. Rose Rita serves as kind of an unofficial consultant to CJM's Executive Director. She designs curriculum and helps train counselors to teach the anger management class. She plans to work with the case workers in that area to help them carry on the important work of serving ex-offenders as they build a new life for themselves. Because of the pandemic, all of her work is done via Zoom conference meetings. CJM sets up the technology and she leads the meetings from the safety of Theresa House – the SSND community of 70 Sisters that she calls home.

As she counsels people who are interested in prison ministry, she dispenses some sage advice: "I've interviewed a lot of people who want to work inside, to preach. We don't go inside to preach. We go inside to listen. It is often the greatest gift: to listen. They have a painful story, and being listened to aids one in healing."

In encouraging someone to consider this ministry within the Church, Sr. Rose Rita would ask these simple questions: Do you want to grow in your faith? Do you want to grow as a person? Do you want to be surprised by God? Do you want to see God in the poor?

What does it take to work in prisons? According to Sr. Rose Rita, you cannot explain it, you have to experience it. "It's openness to God looking like you don't expect God to look. You have to be open to hear their story. These are stories of pain and how they passed that pain on to someone else. It's real. And, it's a struggle to hear that, and some people turn off," she explained.

In her experience, Sr. Rose Rita shared that many people who volunteer have been affected by incarceration, and that is what motivates them to want to help others.

"If you want to find the poorest of the poor, you go to a prison," she said.

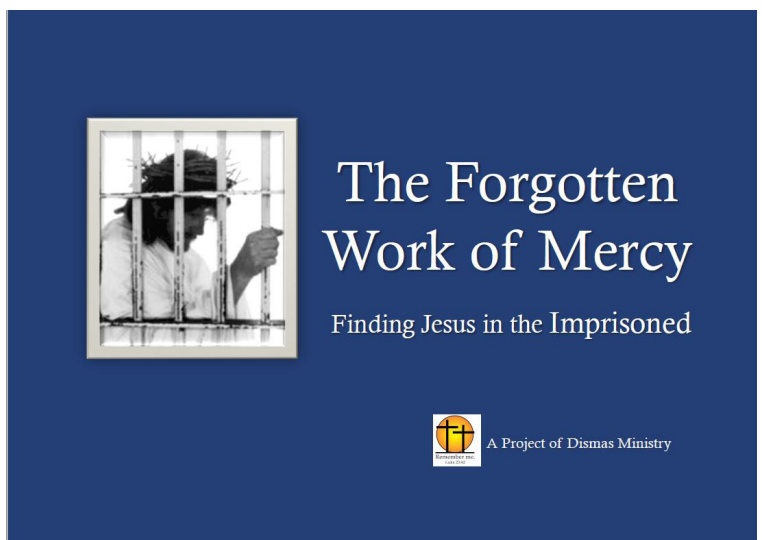
Sr. Rose Rita Huelsmann, SSND, is a member of the School Sisters of Notre Dame – Central Pacific Province, and she serves on the Dismas Ministry Board of Directors.

Introducing a new training resource from Dismas Ministry

The Forgotten Work of Mercy: Finding Jesus in the Imprisoned

Visiting the prisoner, one of the seven Corporal Works of Mercy, is an important ministry of the Church. Yet, it remains a quiet endeavor in comparison to feeding the hungry or clothing the naked. This special program, *The Forgotten Work of Mercy: Finding Jesus in the Imprisoned*, includes a brief overview and insights on the current state of incarceration in the United States, how prisoners practice their Catholic faith "inside" and how people can be of in-person service to them. A PowerPoint presentation and accompanying study guide feature a four-part lesson plan with interactive components, discussion questions, and action steps.

During Lent, we invite you to learn more about visiting prisoners. The materials provide a brief introduction to a much-needed ministry of the Church. It is designed to raise awareness of and inspire interest in prison ministry. Learn more at www.dismasministry.org/fwom



Blessed with the Best

We are grateful to our many benefactors and friends who continue to support the mission of Dismas Ministry, including these grant making organizations, and others, who wish to remain anonymous:

ACTA Foundation
The Catholic Community Foundation
Green Bay Packers Foundation
Guadalupe and Lilia Martinez Foundation
Our Sunday Visitor Institute

Thank You!

From Our Donors...

In a survey of donors, we ask why they choose to give to Dismas Ministry. Here are some of their responses:

"I choose to give to Dismas Ministry because I know you do such excellent work in helping incarcerated people. And, having been a Catholic volunteer in a women's prison, I have directly benefitted from your kindness when you sent us Bibles. Thank you!"

~Sue, a donor from Kentucky

"I give to Dismas Ministry because the outreach is so crucial to individuals looking for hope, and opening the door to God's presence in their lives."

~Fr. Tim, a donor from Iowa



Dismas Ministry
PO Box 070363
Milwaukee, WI 53207
www.dismasministry.org

A Newsletter published by Dismas Ministry
A national Catholic outreach for inmates, victims, their families, those released from prison, and the community.

DISMAS MINISTRY is registered as a nonprofit corporation in the State of Wisconsin, and listed in the US Catholic Directory as a religious, tax-exempt, 501(c)(3) organization. All gifts are tax deductible.

Follow us on social media!



Pathfinding for Women Prisoners

A new resource is available for women prisoners that will enrich their spiritual journey behind bars: *A Way of the Cross – for Women in Prison, for Women Confined and Caged*, written by Elizabeth Harmatys Park, PhD.

"This Lent, as we look back on a year of Covid-19 restriction, illness and death, it is hard to imagine the additional suffering experienced by those who are incarcerated. Prisoners have been ill and afraid, isolated from each other and from family visits. Christ, companion and healer, blesses and comforts in the meditative praying of *The Way of the Cross*," said Dr. Park, a prison visitor and mentor to prisoners for twenty-five years.

For the past fifteen years she and her husband have been part of a ministry team that brings a weekly Catholic worship service and communion to a medium security prison for women.

"The women prisoners of faith I have known are inspiring examples of perseverance and hope in suffering. Their reflections on scripture are insightful and vibrant. Their prayers are authentic and generous. The daily life of a woman in prison is a way of the cross. I wrote *A Way of the Cross* for women prisoners to help unite the experiences they have shared with me to an ancient and holy spiritual practice I have always revered," she said.

Thank you, Dr. Park, for developing this meaningful resource to help illuminate the path for women prisoners. To order copies of A Way of the Cross, please visit www.dismasministry.org/store/wayofthecross

