Sunday July 25, 2021

Prison Ministry Awareness 2021

“Bring my soul out of prison, that I may praise Your name.” (Psalm 142:7)

To the Reverend Clergy, Monastics, and Pious Faithful of our Holy Orthodox Church in the United States:

Beloved Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Greetings and blessings to you all!

The Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the United States has blessed us to observe the Sunday before the feast of St. Silas, the patron saint of prison ministry, as Prison Ministry Awareness Sunday. This year we remember this sacred ministry on July 25, 2021.

After a year of isolation, we are experiencing the full joy of our freedom this summer. Many of us are making up for lost time: taking trips, seeing our friends, and most importantly, returning to our churches in person.

For our brothers and sisters in prison, it has been a hard year as well. Lockdowns meant many of the 2.3 million men and women incarcerated in the United States were in truly deep isolation without visitations from family, friends, and clergy. As restrictions now ease, we are called more than ever to exercise our own freedoms to serve those who have suffered emotionally, physically, and spiritually over these last months. Now is the moment to cherish our blessings by sharing them with those who our Lord has commanded us to see Himself in.

Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.’ (Matthew 25).

Along with those in prison right now, we can find the Lord in the faces of those who have been released from prison and are seeking to find community in our parishes and rebuild their lives through the Orthodox way of life. We can also visit the Lord in caring for the family members of prisoners. Indeed, the staggering rates of incarceration in the US make it is difficult to find an Orthodox parish in our country that does not have a parishioner deeply affected by the incarceration of an immediate family member.
As the Episcopal Moderator of Orthodox Christian Prison Ministry, I respectfully request you observe this day of awareness. The Holy Orthodox Church, through Orthodox Christian Prison Ministry, brings the mercy, forgiveness, and love of Christ to those people who need hope and healing living in the darkness of prison.

We humbly ask that after passing a tray for the ongoing work of your parish, you please pass a second tray on Prison Ministry Awareness Sunday for the work of the Orthodox Christian Prison Ministry.

As Saint Isaac the Syrian says, “A cruel and merciless heart is never purified. A merciful man is the doctor of his own soul because as a strong wind from his heart, he drives out the darkness of the passions.” Please show mercy to our brothers and sisters in jails and prisons across the United States on July 25th.

With much love and thanks in our risen Lord,

†Mark

†Archbishop Mark of Philadelphia and Eastern Pennsylvania, OCA
To all the Clergy and the Laity of the Holy Orthodox Churches in the United States:

Christ is in our midst!

The Hierarchs of the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops have blessed the Sunday before the feast of St. Silas (the patron of prison ministry) to be Prison Ministry Awareness Sunday in all US Orthodox parishes.

In 2021, this occurs on Sunday, July 25th.

This is an incredibly important day of awareness for our ministry and we want to help you make the most of it by providing the following resources in this packet:

- Homily Ideas for Prison Ministry
- Bulletin Insert
- Informational Brochure

America’s tragically high incarceration rate (2.3 million) means that—chances are—more than one parishioner has been touched by a person serving time in prison. OCPM introduces prisoners to the fullness of the Orthodox faith. And we help Orthodox who have been convicted of crimes to return to the Orthodox faith and find healing and reconciliation.

But we can’t do it without the support of our parishes.

Please help us fulfill the commandment of our Lord to visit Him in prison (Matthew 25:36) by participating in this vital day of awareness.

After passing a tray for the ongoing work of your parish, we humbly ask that you please pass a second tray on Prison Ministry Awareness Sunday, July 25th, and send these generous gifts to:

Orthodox Christian Prison Ministry
276 5th Avenue
Suite 704-3183
New York, NY 10001

If you have any questions or comments, please reach me at: npetrogeorge@theocpm.org

In Christ,

Nicholas Petrogeorge
Executive Director
HOMILY IDEAS
PRISON MINISTRY AWARENESS SUNDAY
JULY 25, 2020

Gospel Reading: Matthew 8:28-34; 9:1 (The Gergesene Demoniacs)

Mt. 8:28a - “When He had come to the other side, to the country of the Gergesenes, there met Him two
demon-possessed men, coming out of the tombs…”

Many of the people in prison have been under the influence of the powers of darkness their whole lives. They are
often school dropouts from broken and dysfunctional families, whose lives have been ones of continual abuse.
God has a heart for these precious people in prison and He reaches out to them in amazing ways. The
Theotokos and other Saints have appeared to some of the toughest prisoners in order to soften their hearts and
set them free from the bondage of this darkness.

Mt. 8:28b – “(They were) exceedingly fierce, so that no one could pass that way.”

Because of the movies, we can often picture people in prison as violent animals like these demoniacs. Jesus sees
them as they really are: “Men made in the image and likeness of God.” How many of us have said things like:
“Those people in prison have nothing coming!” “They should lock the doors and throw away the keys!” No matter
how far someone has fallen, they do not lose the image of God. It is through the Holy Orthodox Faith that the mud
and mire of sin can be washed off these precious souls and they can begin to live a new life in Christ, even inside
a darkened prison or jail cell. May we see people not as they are, but as they could become through the Holy
Orthodox Faith.

Tie in this quote: “Never confuse the person, formed in the image of God, with the evil that is in him:
because evil is but a chance misfortune, an illness, a devilish reverie. But the very essence of the person
is the image of God, and this remains in him despite every disfigurement” (St. John of Kronstadt).

Can there be any place in our world darker than the bowels of a prison? The powers of darkness rule the
lives of so many who live there. Yet total darkness cannot exist with even the smallest light. Orthodox Christian
Prison Ministry has the task of bringing the Light of Christ to many men and women sitting in the darkness of a
prison. Every Orthodox Study Bible; every Holy Icon; every prayer and study book, sent to a prisoner brings that
precious Light of Christ to their darkened world. And that Light begins to spread in that place driving out the
darkness with each person it touches.

Tie in this Old Testament passage (Isaiah 42:5-8), revealing God’s heart and mission: “Thus says God, the
Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread forth the earth and what comes from
it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: “I am the Lord, I have called
you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the
people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness. I am the Lord!”
We are called to bring the Light of Christ to those living in darkness and to bring the prisoners out of the “tombs” (the dungeon). Christ brought The Light to these precious demoniacs living in darkness and He calls all of us to be a part of this work. “I was in prison and you visited me!” Not all of us can go into a prison, but all of us can be involved with prison ministry. We can help send prayer and study books to them; we can help send Holy Icons to them; we can help with the training of those who will go into the prisons or those who will write people in prison. Our gifts today will make us a part of the wonderful ministry of OCPM. Night is coming; let us work while we can!

Can you imagine in your mind what these demoniacs must have felt when they were set free from the powers of darkness? That same joy fills the heart of every man and woman in prison who is baptized into the Holy Orthodox Faith or who returns to the Faith of their youth. Former altar boys have come back to the Church in prison! They have been set free spiritually and their lives are transformed. One man who was baptized in a maximum secure prison wept through his entire baptism.

OTHER QUOTES TO TIE IN WITH A HOMILY FOR PRISON MINISTRY AWARENESS SUNDAY

“To judge sins is the business of one who is sinless, but who is sinless except God? Whoever thinks about the multitude of his own sins in his heart never wants to make the sins of others a topic of conversation. To judge a man who has gone astray is a sign of pride, and God resists the proud. On the other hand, one who every hour prepares himself to give answer for his own sins will not quickly lift up his head to examine the mistakes of others.” (St. Gennadius of Constantinople, The Golden Chain, 53-55)

Do not be angry at anyone and do not hate anyone, neither for their faith, nor for their shameful deeds... Do not foster hatred for the sinner, for we are all guilty... Hate his sins, and pray for him, so that you may be made like unto Christ, who had no dislike for sinners, but prayed for them. (St. Isaac the Syrian, Homily 57,90)

If you do not find pity on a sinner who will suffer in flames, then you do not carry the grace of the Holy Spirit, but rather an evil spirit; and while you yet live, you must free yourself from his clutches through repentance.” (St. Silouan the Athonite)

Do not lose your temper with those who sin. Do not have a passion for noticing every sin in your neighbor and judging it, as we usually do. Everyone will give an answer for himself before God. Especially, do not look with evil intention on the sins of those older than you, with whom you have no business. But correct your own sins, your own heart. (St. John of Kronstadt, My Life in Christ, I.6)

If you see your neighbor in sin, don't look only at this, but also think about what he has done or does that is good, and infrequently trying this in general, while not partially judging, you will find that he is better than you. (St. Basil the Great, Conversations, 20)

If you see a man who has sinned and you do not pity him, the grace of God will leave you. Whoever curses bad people, and does not pray for them, will never come to know the grace of God. (St. Silouan the Athonite, Writings, VII.4, VIII.6)

One who strictly prosecutes the misdemeanors of others will find not condescension towards his own. (St. John Chrysostom, On the Statutes, 3.6)

Let there always be a preponderance of mercy with you, even though you don't feel such mercy in yourself, as God has for the world ... A cruel and merciless heart is never purified. A merciful man is the doctor of his own soul because as a strong wind from his heart, he drives out the darkness of the passions.” (St. Isaac the Syrian, Homilies, 41)
Did you know that there are Orthodox Christians practicing their faith in prison?

Or that there are prisoners who are ready to repent of their crimes and embrace the Orthodox Church?

**Who will minister to them?**

Orthodox Christian Prison Ministry (OCPM) is the national prison ministry of the Orthodox Church. OCPM corresponds with thousands of prisoners across the country and provides spiritual books, Bibles, icons, and catechism courses. OCPM trains Orthodox priests and laypeople to enter prisons and minister to prisoners.

Together we can fulfill the Lord’s commandment to visit Him in prison (Matthew 25:36 – “I was in prison and you visited me.”)

**2MILLION**
ICONS DISTRIBUTED TO PRISONERS

**40,723**
BIBLE STUDIES, DAILY READINGS, AND SPIRITUAL REFLECTIONS SENT IN 2020
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**OUR MISSION**
Orthodox Christian Prison Ministry serves those who are incarcerated and their families, and provides resources, training, and support to our ministry partners so that lives are transformed and God is glorified.

**WHAT OCPM DOES**
Orthodox Christian Prison Ministry (OCPM) proclaims the love of Christ to men and women who are incarcerated. We do this by applying the teachings of the Orthodox Faith to correspond with thousands of prisoners, providing them personalized spiritual care, Bibles, books, icons, catechism, and study courses. For those wishing to live an Orthodox way of life, we advocate on their behalf for correctional facilities around the country to recognize the Orthodox faith, so that priests can enter prison facilities and administer the Sacraments and Services.

As the national prison ministry of the Orthodox Church, we provide resources and training to local parishes and clergy, enabling them to offer local solutions and fulfill Christ’s command to visit Him in prison. As a result, families are reunited, marriages are healed, and thousands of incarcerated men and women have a new sense of peace and restored order in their lives.

- We correspond with prisoners to provide personalized spiritual care, Bibles, books, icons, catechism, and study courses.
- We publish our own books and icons, which have been designed for use in prison and are printed to meet the stringent rules of prison mailing rooms.
- We catechize prisoners in the Orthodox faith through a series of correspondence study courses.
- We train Orthodox priests and laypersons to visit and counsel those in prison and to provide the Sacraments.
- OCPM advocates for correctional facilities around the country to recognize the Orthodox faith so that priests can enter prisons and administer the Sacraments and the services.
BY THE NUMBERS

Prisoners hear from OCPM, on average, 120 times per year.

40,723 Bible studies, daily readings, and spiritual reflections were sent to prisoners in 2020.

6,142 personalized letters were sent and received by OCPM

YOUR GIFT TO OCPM IMPACTS REAL LIVES

• From an Orthodox Christian in prison: “I have completed the Orthodox Christian Catechism study course . . . The course was excellent and perhaps the most comprehensive Biblical presentation of the Faith I have come across. Truly wonderful!”

• “I look forward to the next studies . . . I am at a loss for words at the humanity I feel you have brought into my world. Thank you.”

• “God bless you all. I am so very thankful to you all and my kids too. They have seen a big difference in my life thanks to you all. They told me to tell you thank you for all you have done and the difference you have made in my life.”

INVITE AN OCPM SPEAKER TO YOUR PARISH

OCPM trains clergy and laity in the unique work that is prison ministry. Our chaplain/speakers have decades of experience in prisons at every security level. We are available for virtual and in-person seminars. Reach out to us to speak with our prison ministry experts or access our publications and resources. Email us at communications@theocpm.org.

“" I AM AT A LOSS FOR WORDS AT THE HUMANITY I FEEL YOU HAVE BROUGHT INTO MY WORLD. THANK YOU. “"