

PRISON MINISTRY AWARENESS SUNDAY

Sample Homily

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Written by H. Paul Finley

OCPM Prison Relationship Manager and Spiritual Content Writer



+In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Glory to Jesus Christ! *Glory Forever!*

The Assembly of Orthodox Bishops in North America has designated the last Sunday in July **Prison Ministry Awareness Sunday**. Our Hierarchs are reminding us to consider how we might serve those in prison. They are calling us again to remember the words of Christ Himself: *"I was in prison, and you visited Me."*

In today's Gospel reading of Jesus healing the demon-possessed men, the Fathers have given us a perfect look into the heart of prison ministry. When Christ visited these men, they had come *"out of the tombs"* and the men themselves were *"so fierce that no one would pass [their] way."* This is a terrifying story. But the Lord is never afraid of them. In fact, His healing love toward them is so powerful, that the people of the town are ultimately afraid of Jesus! The crowd witnessed His divinity in the way He visited and cared for these men, who we can know were not only exorcized of their demons, but as St. Paul says in today's Epistle reading, were truly saved by their confession. *"...If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved."*

Today's reading reminds me of a recent story from Fr. John Kowalczyk, who has served as the prison chaplain at SCI Waymart in Pennsylvania for over thirty years. On his rounds through the Mental Health Unit, one day he met a man named Ezra who had lost all sense of reality and was writing expletives on the walls in his own feces. Instead of avoiding him, Fr. John wanted to teach Ezra the Jesus Prayer. They spent months praying together, even holding hands outside of his cell. The Prayer slowly transformed Ezra, as it transforms all of us. Fr. John would tell Ezra over and over, "Christ loves you, and obviously I love you." Now, the prison staff calls Ezra a miracle, who is often seen reading his Orthodox prayer

book and attending the Vespers services Fr. John offers in the facility. This is just one story from the 1,400 people in prison that Orthodox Christian Prison Ministry serves across the country.

Brothers and sisters, there are many reasons to visit the prisoner. First of all, Jesus commands us to do so. Christ always blesses obedience, and there is a price to be paid for disobedience. You may think you do not know anyone in prison, but as of this year, there are 113 million adults in the United States alone that have an immediate family member that has been to prison or jail. If no one comes to mind for you, chances are you know someone who has secretly been hurt by the struggles of incarceration.

Secondly, we visit the prisoner so that they may enter into salvation. OCPM always seeks to introduce someone in prison to the Faith and facilitate his or her journey to the Kingdom of Heaven. For the Orthodox prisoner, we are calling them to turn fully back to Christ and follow Him. For Orthodox inquirers, we are giving them the Church for the first time in their lives.

A third reason to keep Christ's command is because, as He clearly states in Matthew's gospel, you will meet Him there. "I was in prison, and you came to Me." You will see him in the prisoner you meet, because they are created in His image. When you serve the prisoner, you must be prepared for Christ to speak to you *through them*.

Finally, one last reason to visit those in prison: Christ visited you when you were in prison. You were in bondage to sin, death, and the devil and have been delivered by Holy Baptism. Think of your last confession. You were in bondage to some besetting sin, you repented and confessed, and Christ visited you, loosing the chains, breaking bolt and bar, and freeing you. Serving those inside a literal, earthly prison, will teach you this reality more than anything else can.

It is true that our country, for safety reasons, makes it very difficult to visit the prisoner in person, due to a host of reasons. Our hierarchs have appointed OCPM to help us navigate these issues. Furthermore, are you able to pray? Are you able to give? These, too, are forms of answering Christ's command. The good news of the Gospel of the Kingdom of Heaven is that we are no better than someone in prison. My brothers and sisters, please heed the call of the Church today and consider supporting the work of Orthodox Christian Prison Ministry with your prayers, your gifts, and your service.

To Him be all glory, honor, and worship to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. Amen.