

CRIMINAL JUSTICE MINISTRY

The Diocese of San Angelo, Texas is located in a 29 county area that encompass 37,433 square miles. The attached map shows the large geographical areas with 49 parishes and 23 missions. There are 50 facilities of incarceration, and a Catholic population numbering over 8,000, which constitutes the largest "parish" in the diocese. About 70% of the incarcerated Catholics are of Hispanic descent. The large bi-lingual and bi-cultural population and vast geographic area make ministering to the imprisoned "parishioners" a major challenge for the diocese. Additional impediments to ministry in prisons include a lack of support from facility chaplains who are already overworked handling a larger than desirable inmate population.

In July 2000, Pope John Paul II said that we must offer to those who commit crimes a way of redeeming themselves and making a positive return to society. Also, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops published a document, "Responsibility, Rehabilitation and Restoration" in November 2000 which says that the Catholic approach must deal with the human dignity of both the victim and offender. While the Diocese of San Angelo ministers to victims and offenders, the ministry is limited to the extent there are trained volunteers with the skills to provide the Catholic services in the facilities.

The vision and aim for our Criminal Justice Ministry efforts in the diocese is to focus on four main areas:

- Offenders in Jails, Prisons and Juvenile Facilities
- Ex-Offenders and Families
- Victims and Families
- Social Justice Issues Related to Criminal Justice

The Director of Criminal Justice Ministry for the diocese is Deacon Dan Shannahan. Deacon Dan is located in San Angelo, Texas and serves the entire diocese in this ministry effort. One challenge is to recruit and train volunteers to help organize programs to meet the needs of the inmates at each of the major facilities. Another focus is to develop a strong working relationship with the chaplains of each facility, which can be critical to the smooth implementation of programs and to minimizing obstacles for those serving so their time can be effectively utilized.

Over 60,000 offenders are being released each year from Texas prisons. Through information provided weekly by the prison system, those offenders who are Catholic and being released to our diocese are identified. A program entitled "Welcome Home" is being implemented with information provided at the parish level. An aftercare program is setup to make contact with an offender upon release and reach out to them and their families by assisting with food, shelter and clothing, as well as, any potential job leads. These actions of love, support, and fellowship can be critical to a successful transition as the incarcerated rate of offenders is very high during the first few months after release.

In addition to ministering to offenders, New Life Ministry (NLM) support groups have been established in Midland and San Angelo, and plans are underway to expand these groups to Abilene, Odessa and Big Spring. The group offers support to families of the incarcerated, ex-offenders coming home and those dealing with drug and alcohol abuse in the home. The attached brochure advertises the NLM group in Midland. Our focus in society has been to punish the offender and many times there is no one to offer comfort and support to the victims of crime, including the families of the offenders. The Church must be a place where those that are broken can find peace and hope, and be reconciled and healed by the loving touch of Christ, as experienced through others.

There are many social justice issues that need to be addressed. The first and foremost must be to abolish the death penalty. Also, our youth need a place to go after school to participate in supervised activities so that juvenile crime can be reduced. Alternative facilities need to be expanded for our drug and alcohol offenders, as opposed, to housing them with the harden criminal and exposing them to prison gangs. Also, the successful drug court program in Tom Green County needs to be expanded to other towns in the diocese. At the moment, a grant to establish a drug court in Midland is being pursued. In addition, a greater emphasis needs to be place on the implementing more rehabilitation programs in the prisons to assist inmates before their release.

The ultimate goals of the Criminal Justice Ministry program are to build a strong community of imprisoned Catholics who receive Catholic education and sacraments so that they will make a positive and permanent return to society, to help victims recover and heal, and support families while their loved one is in prison, and afterwards when they return home. Not just Catholics, but all citizens of our state, need to be educated about criminal justice and related issues to understand that this is our problem, and we must all be a part of the solution.