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I was in prison and you visited me

Dons Onyeke, CSSp

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

I celebrate two Masses every Sunday in Beon prison, Madang, Papua New Guinea. The first Mass in the dilapidated prison chapel used by other denominations is for the prisoners in the minimum security prison, the prison wardens and their families and people from the neighbouring villages. After that I move over to the maximum security prisons for the high risk criminals and remandees. I always regard my Sunday Mass as my Good Friday.

When I arrive here the first gate is opened to let me into a small security corridor and is locked immediately again from the inside. Then the second gate is opened. It eventually lets me into the maximum security compound to the echoes of "Moning Pater!" (Good Morning Father!) coming from some of the half-naked inmates close by. My ministry begins from here as some take the split-second opportunity to ask for one help or the other, or to slip a note or a letter into my hand or pocket. I will only know the content when I get home. Shaking hands with as many inmates as possible I make my way to the place where we celebrate Mass.

The Mass begins with all of them sitting half-naked on the concrete floor, their bodies and faces disfigured by scabies, grille, ringworm and dark spots from the bites of bed-bugs. Somebody gets up to do the reading but struggles to stand erect because of hunger. Besides, he is aligning the book in so many positions close to his eyes to be able to read and repeating each word several times. The reason? He can't see well. Because of acute malnutrition, the majority of them have eye problems.

After mass comes "asking time" — when I am surrounded by up to 30 or 40 prisoners at the same time all asking for one thing or the other ranging from

the ordinary to the extraordinary. The majority ask for medicines, soap, reading glasses, exercise books and pens, clothes, bibles and rosaries. Others will give letters for posting or for hand delivery, phone numbers to call, specific messages to be delivered to the National and Supreme Courts or to family members, addresses of people to go and see, requests for recommendation letters to the Parole Board, requests for food (for those who don't get visitors), requests for help in paying court fines or for bail fees. The list is endless.

With such an avalanche of requests what can one do? I cannot say yes to all. On the other hand, how can I say no, knowing full well that for so many of them I am perhaps their only hope?

I opt for something simple. With the collaboration of a very close friend, who also helps with some of the medicines, we bake a small cake which I take with me to Sunday Mass for the thirty or more who come. This I give to one of them to share after Mass. Each gets a piece no bigger than an index finger. More prisoners are now coming for Mass and even those who don't come simply jump in when the cake is being shared, often creating a chaotic and frightening situation as everybody fights to get a piece. Where do I go from here?

Last September there was a jail break in the maximum security which resulted in sixteen hard core inmates escaping.

One of them was a guitarist at the Sunday liturgy. A warden later remarked to me "Pater, ol I giamanim yu wantaim lotu tasol" — "Father, they are just using coming to Mass as a cover up."

Notwithstanding all the utter meaninglessness, all the confusion, all the inadequacies that I face, I have surprised myself by falling in "love" with them. We all look forward to seeing each other and I must confess that for now I can't wish for anything else. ■

Below:
Christmas celebration
in the Beon minimum
security prison.



Above:
Easter Sunday
in the Beon maximum
security prison.

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