

## **A Virgin Crosses Over . . . Again.**

The Virgin of Guadalupe appeared in Mexico at a time when the indigenous people had been defeated, enslaved and ravaged by diseases brought from faraway lands. To these broken and marginalized people she brought the message of God's love in *their* language, in the heart of *their* land, and in the symbols of *their* history and culture. In a sense, she "crossed over" from a foreign culture and became one with the people of the New World.

How suitable that on her feast day hundreds of Catholic women and men celebrated mass inside the California Institution for Women (CIW), a women's prison located in Corona, California. They came to share the message of God's love with broken and marginalized women in *their* sacred space, experiencing *their* sense of confinement, and joining with *their* very vibrant Catholic community. Those from the outside "crossed over" to meet women on the inside, to rediscover the commonalities all of us share, and to become one Catholic community joined in song, scripture and communion.

The special mass was convened by Bishop Zavala of the Los Angeles Archdiocese in coordination with Maryloyola Yettke, CIW's Catholic Chaplain, and Jan Urban, Program Director of Crossroads, a program of The Center for Restorative Justice Works that helps the Catholics from the "outside" build community with women on the "inside".

"To come from the outside to be with you is a gift to us," Bishop Zavala announced to the assembly of over 200. "We recognize in you dignity and goodness." A sentiment echoed by many of the visitors who very willingly traveled great distances in the rain and waited in line for the prison clearance process.

"I used to come to visit a family member who was at CIW," shared Erica Lopez of Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish in Chino, "but now I visit the women because I enjoy it."

CIW was established in 1952 on 120 acres that were at one time surrounded by endless cattle pastures and feed lots. The neighbors are now newly built housing developments that creep ever closer, but smell a lot better. The prison was designed to house 1,026 women, but today houses nearly 2,600.

Sr. Carmel Crimmins has been coming to CIW for over ten years to visit, attend mass, and participate in spirituality and enrichment programs for the women. "I've come to understand the importance of presence. And I do a lot of listening." With a lovely Irish lilt, she adds, "When I travel to Europe and talk to my friends about my experiences with the U.S. prison system, they are shocked at the length of sentences for women. Women with children would never serve decades in prison in the U.K. as they do here."

While the mass was indeed a gift of shared music, culture and reflection, evidence of the "crossover" spirit was joyfully present in the shared meal afterwards. Small circles of chairs were spontaneously formed and people from the "inside" and "outside" blended in a way that was organic and unforced. Kathy, a woman anticipating release in early 2010 said that she, "will be looking to find something like this to be of service and to stay on the right path."

Some circles conversed in Spanish, others in English; some were engaged in serious discussion, while others joked and laughed. And as so often happens with meetings of the minds and hearts, the time passed all too quickly. The good-byes felt like a pulling away just when things were getting good. But there are promises and opportunities for the conversation to continue.

Perhaps a prayer to The Virgin of Guadalupe is in order:

*Beloved Lady, Bless our crossovers, that they may bring continued community, communion and conversion. And bless the growth of a critical mass that will bring about systemic change for greater justice for all of those impacted by the criminal justice system.*