

LOCAL NEWS

By Elisabeth Delfino

Nick Pulone had never been to jail—until February 6. That was the day he drove out to the California Institute for Women in Corona.

It was a cloudy, drizzly day, and Pulone felt a sense of foreboding as he parked near the guard tower. That ominousness grew as he watched trucks drive in and out of the facility—after undergoing a thorough check, complete with mirrors, to make sure nothing unacceptable was being brought in or out. Then, after he entered the prison, Pulone had to return to his car to drop off his BlackBerry, which he was not permitted to bring inside.

"I was nervous," the St. Angela Merici parishioner admits.

Pulone was part of a group of nearly 90 Catholics from parishes near the prison (as well as Bishop Cabildo Zavala, JCL, auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles), who participated in this Crossover, a meeting that brought them together with nearly 120 inmates of the facility. The event was funded by a grant to the Women and Criminal Justice Network to "get the Catholic folks out of the pews and into the prisons—in conversation," explains WCCJN program director Jan Urban.

Sister Suzanne Jabro, CSI, formed the network in hopes of promoting policy reform and providing opportunities for women outside to be in conversation with women inside. (This Crossover was the first in which men from the outside also participated.) She also formed three spiritual enrichment groups for the women inside. Members of those groups signed up to participate in this Crossover conversation, which is one of a series of Crossovers involving different populations; others have involved women 55 and older, for instance, or women aged 18 to 30.

"We are there for compassionate conversation, whether it's of a spiritual nature or of a more basic, nuts-and-bolts, secular nature," says Urban, also a parishioner at Brea's St. Angela Merici.

Participants included detention ministry

Crossing Over to the Inside



personnel, who appreciated the look inside a prison (most detention ministry work focuses on local jails, where inmates usually have shorter terms for minor offenses, or as an initial step before being moved to prison). Many participants, however, had never participated in detention ministry. Among those were Pulone and Juli Protentic, another St. Angela parishioner.

"I'm at the age of 52, and I'm at a time

where you reflect upon life, and things that you might have done, or you could have done, or things that are wrong that you've done, and you are very blessed with what you've been given in life," says Protentic. "I felt that there was maybe something I could bring to the table when talking to these women about life."

Indeed, that was the focus of the Crossover. Participants broke up into small groups

of insiders and outsiders; the insiders then had a chance to tell the outsiders what they most wanted them to hear—their greatest concerns, their biggest troubles. Following lunch—which the outsiders had brought with them—the small groups focused on the four topics that had surfaced most persistently in the morning session: faith and justice; forgiveness; connectiveness; and bridging the gap between inside and outside.

"They were so open, and they were so grateful," says Protentic. "Sister Suzanne announced that we each provided \$30 to be there, for the lunch, and each one of the four girls [in my small group] got tears in their eyes."

"The fact that we visited these women made such an impression on them—that we cared enough. I found so much repentance—from them, and acceptance of their duty to pay off their crime; they're just normal, and they're just so appreciative of anything the outside world can do for them."

"I had no idea what was on the inside," Pulone says simply. "One lady had been in there for 29 years, another for over 30 years."

"It almost seems like the hand that the justice system forgot. Somebody holds up a liquor store and shoots somebody and gets out in seven years; one of these ladies was in a bad marriage, threatened and abused, and she unfortunately retaliated by using a handgun, and shot her husband in the arm. For attempted murder, she's got almost 35 years. There's a huge imbalance there."

That opening of the eyes is exactly what Crossovers are about. "Our goal is to get folks who haven't been touched by this ministry to get involved," says Urban. "We want to get this connection, because that's where transformation happens. It's through this relationship that the Crossover provides, this personal relationship and conversation, that we have hope for systemic change." ■■■

For information about upcoming Crossovers, go to www.wccjnetwork.us or contact Jan Urban at 714-423-5802.