

Visiting Refugees Behind Bars: A Sister's Journey through Adelanto Detention Center

By Bryanna Benedetti-Coomber

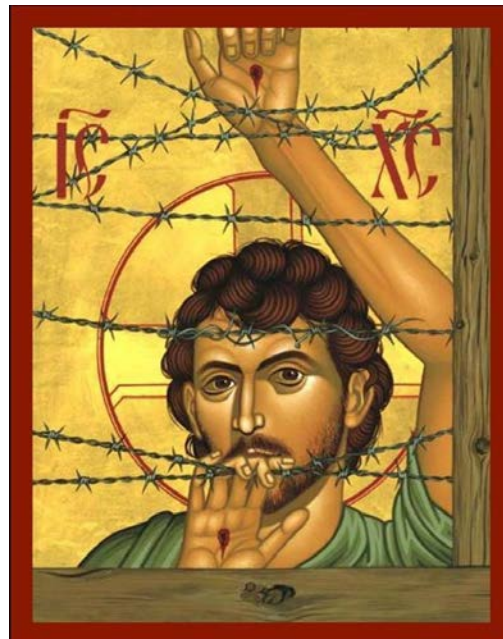
Adelanto Detention Center sits in a valley in the south-central Mojave Desert – an arid desolate region two hours' drive from Encino through the Los Angeles traffic and El Cajon Pass. It is quite a trek for anyone, let alone a Catholic Sister, 10 years into retirement. But neither the trek nor the climate deters Sr. Diane Donoghue, SSS, and her companions – a small group of women volunteers – from making the journey into the desert monthly to visit detainees.

Sr. Diane entered the Sisters of Social Service order at 24 years old and has been committed to the religious life for 61 years. She earned a BA in Political Science and an MSW focused on community organizing. She has been working in as a community organizer for over 20 years and despite retirement hasn't seemed to slow down in her commitment to all of God's children.

"As long as I have the energy, I will exercise it," Sr. Diane explains. And exercise it, she has. Looking back on her years of social justice and work in the community, she views her work not as a step out of retirement, but as a continuation of who she is and her promises to her community.

Sr. Diane began volunteering with the small group of women in January 2016, after learning about their work through a talk held at Immaculate Heart High School in Los Angeles. The modest but determined group of women, whom Sr. Diane joined in their ministry, come from a mix of Christian backgrounds, including the Presbyterian, Unitarian Universalist, and Roman Catholic churches.

Adelanto Detention Facility is a for-profit facility owned by GEO Group and subcontracted by ICE (Immigration Customs Enforcement) to house immigrants, many of whom have crossed our borders seeking asylum and have not been accused or convicted of a crime. The group is committed to visiting about 2 dozen detainees a month at Adelanto, alternating between visiting men and women, held in separate locations within the facility. Detainees at the center come from all regions of the world, including Asia, Europe, Africa, and the Americas, and are being held as federal immigration detainees.



***Christ of Maryknoll Icon
By Br. Robert Lentz, OFM***

The main purpose of the group's visits is to end isolation and to let the men and women detainees know they are not forgotten. While the group cannot offer legal advice, they gather information and document the conditions of the detention center, while offering encouragement to those inside. As they are not American citizens, detainees are not guaranteed the same rights as citizens and are often held for long periods of time without legal representation. Additionally, detainees do not have a legal protected right to visitors or phone calls, and are often separated from spouses into different facilities with limited contact. The group offers their support and witness to those detained at Adelanto.

Sr. Diane sees her work at Adelanto, not only as an extension of herself, but also as a way of honoring the history of the SSS community and founders: "As a Sister of Social Service, commitment to social justice is primary," says Sr. Diane. "We have always focused on those most at the margins of society and worked in interfaith and ecumenical circles, beginning with our foundress, Sr. Margaret Slachta in Hungary." Sr. Margaret founded the SSS in 1923, rooting the order in Benedictine spirituality and embracing the call to be pioneers out in the world, working for social change and justice for all.

Historically, the SSS in California have always worked with refugee populations, beginning with the first post-WWII immigration from Korea, followed by the second and third waves from Vietnam and Indo-China. Sr. Susan Kam and the late Sr. Bertille Prus were among the SSS Sisters who worked with Catholic Charities to welcome these waves of refugees and asylum-seekers, providing basic necessities as well as education, job training, and adoptive families for orphans.

The waves of refugees and asylum-seekers have continued to ebb and flow across our borders and beaches with globalization and violence in various parts of the world. Most recently, we have seen an increase of people fleeing from the bloodshed in Syria, seeking refuge in Europe and the United States. To address this newest wave, the U.S. has raised the number of refugees accepted into our nation to 85,000 for 2016 and will be aiming to allow 100,000 refugees in 2017. This number includes at least 10,000 refugees from Syria, in addition to those already seeking asylum from other war-torn or impoverished regions.

Dear Friends, let us not forget the flesh of Christ which is the flesh of the refugees: their flesh is the flesh of Christ.

- Pope Francis

An influx of people means the need for an influx of Christian love and support. Pope Francis addressed the issues surrounding the plight of refugees in his message for the 2015 World Day of Migrants and Refugees, stating, "It is necessary to respond to the globalization of migration with the globalization of charity and cooperation, in such a way as to make the conditions for migrants more humane." Answering the call of Pope Francis, and moreover the call of Jesus Christ, to care for the community is a part of being a Sister of Social Service and an integral part of Sr. Diane's life.

While the primary purpose of the visits is offer support to immigrants while in the detention center, Sr. Diane's larger goal at hand is to educate citizens and policy makers about the issues faced by detainees in private for-profit correction facilities, such as Adelanto, in order to limit government support of these facilities. There are several for-profit correction facilities run by the GEO Group in the California, and many others run by other corporations.

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There are a number of known issues associated with for-profit facilities. The corporations who run these facilities are paid per prisoner for shelter, food, programs, etc. and answer to investors on the NYSE above the government. The company mission of the GEO Group espouses a commitment to growing profits, which means that they are committed to detaining more people in their facility and for longer periods, and have an incentive to cut back on the needs of the detainees in order to turn a higher profit.

In 2015, Adelanto more than tripled the amount of beds in their facility from 640 beds to 1,940 to raise their profit margin. Men and women spend 6 1-hour blocks of time in lockdown, where space is severely limited due to this increase. In November 2015, detainees desperate to be heard staged a hunger strike to draw public attention to their calls for better medical care, food, and ability to lodge grievances to non-GEO employees, citing limited food, abuse, isolation, and overcrowding as a few reasons for their hunger strike. As Sr. Diane stresses, for-profit detention facilities have the least amount of accountability in the system. Though they are accredited, there is no regular onsite checks or oversight of their activities and there is no transparency or accountability for those detained.

“Migrants and refugees are not pawns on the chessboard of humanity,” Pope Francis asserted, as he spoke on Migrant and Refugee rights in 2014, stressing the humanity and rights of those seeking a better life through migration. And yet, given their lack of rights and state of detention in the U.S., immigrants in such facilities seem to be just that. Human beings are being starved of basic rights, at times quite literally, in order to feed the growth of investor dividends and corporate profit margins.

The U.S. Justice Department agrees, coming out with a statement on August 18 making a pledge to end the use of private prisons to house federal prisoners, citing the abuses above and lack of efficiency as reasons to move away from private correctional facilities. While a step in the right direction, the statement will have no effect the people detained in privately owned state or federal facilities used by ICE or the U.S. Marshals Service, such as Adelanto.

Yet hope for change is not lost, as the women continue on their journeys to and from the desert of Adelanto, asserting and affirming a commitment to justice and love for all of God's children. Sr. Diane, among this few but mighty group of women, hopes to act as a witness to the detainees' experiences and a voice for those who are not being heard through the thick walls of injustice. Sr. Diane's long-term goal is to work with state legislators in Sacramento to limit government support of private for-profit facilities, sharing stories from those detained inside and fighting for the dignity of all people.

How can you help?

- **Pray:** Please keep the men, women, and families being held in immigration detention in your daily prayers.
- **Get informed:** Read up on for-profit detention and prison centers, such as GEO Group and CCA (Correction Corporation of America).
- **Connect:** Connect with CIVIC (Community Initiatives for Visiting Immigrants in Confinement) working to end the isolation of men and women in U.S. Immigration Detention on their website at <http://www.endisolation.org/>.
- **Reach Out:** Reach out to your local churches and politicians to learn more about how to get involved with prison reform and immigrant detention.

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