



Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns



Lenten Reflection Guide 2022

Upholding Human Dignity and Human Rights

Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns

“When we struggle for human rights, for freedom, for dignity, when we feel that it is a ministry of the church to concern itself for those who are hungry, for those who have no schools, for those who are deprived, we are not departing from God’s promise. He comes to free us from sin, and the church knows that sin’s consequences are all such injustices and abuses. The church knows it is saving the world when it undertakes to speak also of such things.”

— St. Oscar A. Romero, “The Violence of Love”

About this resource

In this Lenten Reflection Guide, we offer reflections, questions, prayers, and actions based on each week's Scripture readings in light of Catholic social teaching on human rights and Maryknoll mission experience. Use this guide individually or in small groups to reflect upon your life patterns, to pray more deeply, and to renew your spirit to face the realities of our world.

Cover image: Photo of woman available on Unsplash: https://unsplash.com/photos/oUVaOjldA_0

Many of the quotes from Maryknoll Missioners are from the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns online Scripture Reflection series. Some are courtesy of Maryknoll Magazine and promotional material from the websites of the Maryknoll Lay Missioners, Sisters, and Fathers and Brothers.

First Sunday of Lent: Photo of river community available on Unsplash: <https://unsplash.com/photos/gldpxjkzD8I>. Photo of Sr. Elsie Monge, MM, courtesy of the Maryknoll Sisters: <https://bit.ly/3sEhuW4>

Second Sunday of Lent: Photo of woman in wheelchair available on Unsplash: <https://unsplash.com/photos/1JJ3Lwex3G0>
Photo of Brother Loren Beaudry, MM, courtesy of Brother Beaudry.

Third Sunday of Lent: Photo of protest available on Unsplash: <https://unsplash.com/photos/nNefMq-v8HQ>
Photo of Fr. Lance Nadeau and Kenyan woman courtesy of Fr. Nadeau.

Fourth Sunday of Lent: Photo of Indigenous woman and child available on Unsplash: <https://unsplash.com/photos/F3BBLFml5Hw>. Photo of Fr. Joe Healey, MM, courtesy of Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers.

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About us

The Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns (MOGC) represents Maryknoll missioners, who are Catholic men and women serving in impoverished communities around the world. The MOGC provides analysis and advocacy on issues of justice, peace, and integrity of creation that affect the countries and communities where Maryknoll missioners serve.

Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns
Washington Office
200 New York Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20001
(202) 832-1780
Email: ogc@maryknollogc.org

Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns
Maryknoll, NY Office
PO Box 311
Maryknoll, NY 10545
(914) 941-7575



First Sunday of Lent

“[The] same Lord is Lord of all, enriching all who call upon him.”

- Romans 10: 11-12

The Season of Lent offers us the opportunity to prepare our hearts for the joy of Easter. In this time, we are invited to examine our lives to see where we have fallen short of our vocation to love God with our whole hearts, minds, and souls, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. We humbly ask God for the grace to love more fully.

In the first reading for this Sunday, Moses recalls God’s faithfulness to the Israelites when they were oppressed in Egypt. In the second reading, St. Paul reminds the Roman Christian community that all believers are radically equal before God. In the Gospel, Jesus rejects the devil’s temptations in the desert. All three readings invite us to remember who we are in the eyes of God and our call to love God in return.

As we turn inward to examine our hearts and recall our identity and mission as Christians, we can also turn outward to see how our failure to love God fully is manifested in society. One grave temptation we face as a global community is to value some lives more than others, to deny the fundamental dignity and value of every human person. All over the world, human dignity is denied and desecrated through the violence of war, desperate poverty, and environmental degradation.

Catholic tradition affirms that an essential part of the work of Christians is to proclaim the fundamental dignity of every person as created in the image of God. Since Vatican II, the Church has recognized that promoting human dignity involves working to protect human rights, which the Church understands to be the minimum conditions and materials that every human person needs to live decently, based on their inherent dignity.

The U.S. Catholic bishops write, “The Catholic tradition teaches that human dignity can be protected and a healthy community can be achieved only if human rights are protected and responsibilities are met. Therefore, every person has a fundamental right to life and a right to those things required for human decency.”

In the Catholic tradition, human rights are understood to correspond to responsibilities. Every person has a right to the conditions which allow them to live decently and a responsibility to neighbors, family, and society to help fulfill the rights and needs of others. As Christians, are we truly committed to promoting the equal dignity of every person? Are we fulfilling our responsibilities toward our neighbors?

In this Lenten reflection guide, we will be exploring the Christian call to promote human rights out of respect for our neighbors’ God-given dignity. As the readings for each week teach us how to examine our hearts and ask for renewal, they also help us reflect on this most essential piece of the Christian vocation. We will explore how Maryknoll missionaries live out this call and reflect on how God is calling us to grow as witnesses of the Kingdom of justice and peace.

Questions for Reflection

What helps you grow in awareness of your own dignity and worth in the eyes of God? How can you promote the human dignity of your neighbors?

Pray

PRAYER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS DAY (2018)

Praise to You, faithful God of life and freedom.
Giving thanks, we celebrate your deep desire for
equality and dignity amid diversity.

Guide us to hear – as one – cries of those made poor
and cries of Earth. Together with peoples of every
place and nation, we honor the anniversary of the
Universal Declaration of Human Rights -- protecting
individuals, upholding the common good... unfold-
ing still in modern history.

We offer thanks, too, for the church's human rights
tradition, evolving through centuries; expressed
anew by Pope St. John XXIII; animated by many
giving their lives for your unquenchable justice.

Lamenting violence, indifference and greed, we
pray for and advocate with those whose rights are
ignored, violated, denied... those displaced, abused,
trafficked.

[The] United Nations; non-governmental organi-
zations and all committed in peace to human rights
within the fullness of your vast creation. Send us
your energizing Spirit to speak truth and be light in
darkness.

With trust and hope, we pray in the name of Jesus
who stood with those oppressed, bringing Good
News in his time, for all ages. Amen.

- [Sr. Roma De Robertis](#), SCIC ~ 2018

Faith in Action

Around the world and in the United States, Mary-
knoll missionaries witness the impacts of racial
injustice and how racism leads to human rights
violations. Ask your Member of Congress to
support a bill that would establish a commission
to study the legacy of slavery:
<https://bit.ly/HR40moge>

Maryknoll Mission Experience



Maryknoll Sr. Elsie Monge (right in photo) has
worked at the forefront of the movement for hu-
man rights in Latin America for many years. After
witnessing grave human rights abuses in Ecuador,
in the late 1970s Sr. Elsie helped found the Na-
tional Ecumenical Commission for Human Rights
(CEDHU), an organization of unions, farmers, and
professional groups that focuses on human rights
education and advocacy, for which she is now the
executive director. Her work investigating human
rights abuses earned her a nomination for the No-
bel Peace Prize in 2004.

She writes, “What we do with the communities
is help them have workshops and courses to help
them better their living conditions but also to
know what their rights are vis a vis the govern-
ment... You have to demand [rights] but you also
have to live and respect others’ rights. You have to
negotiate.

“...I think it’s very important that people from the
developed world reach out their hands to the de-
veloping world. That’s the most important thing,
to empower those people to stand up for them-
selves, to be architects of their own destiny.”

Fast

Turn off anything that supports violence and
demeaning behavior on TV, movies, and the inter-
net. Grow in peace with yourself by fostering a
spirit of gratitude instead of focusing on disap-
pointments.



Second Sunday of Lent

“While he was praying his face changed in appearance and his clothing became dazzling white.”

- Luke 9:29

In the Gospel reading for the second week of Lent, we hear the story of Jesus’s transfiguration. The Christian tradition understands the transfiguration to be a glimpse of Jesus’ heavenly glory, which occurs just before he travels to Jerusalem to set into motion the events that will lead to his death on the cross.

For Christians, the event of Jesus’ bodily transfiguration is paramount – it reminds us that God will take up, transform, and renew all of Creation, because it is good and beautiful. Our human bodies, and all Creation, are loved by God. Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection – foreshadowed in this transfiguration moment -- show us what we are worth in the eyes of God.

All life is sacred, and human dignity can never be erased. But in our world, people with disabilities or who suffer illness or weakness are often disvalued and discarded. It is a monumental tragedy, and it is the duty of Christians to bear courageous witness to the dignity of life despite ability, age, health status, or any other factor.

The Compendium of Catholic Social Doctrine reminds us, “Persons with disabilities are fully human subjects, with rights and duties: ‘in spite of the limitations and sufferings affecting their bodies and faculties, they point up more clearly the dignity and greatness of [humanity]. Since persons with disabilities are subjects with all their rights, they are to be helped to participate in every dimension of family and social life at every level accessible to them and according to their possibilities.”

The human rights of persons with disabilities are not often well protected by law or social practice. Several Maryknoll missionaries are working to advance the rights and circumstances of persons with disabilities, bearing witness to their fundamental dignity.

Joe Loney, a Maryknoll lay missionary in Bolivia, tells a story from his ministry, which seeks to recognize the dignity of persons with disabilities by helping them find the means to contribute to their families and societies:

“[Doña Rosenda is] raising her grandson, [Juan Carlos,] who suffers from a complete hearing loss and intellectual challenges by herself. Their small fields of potatoes, corn and wheat terraced on the sides of steep mountain valleys sustain them. They raise sheep to obtain cash income.

Among the activities of our program is an economic sustenance component, where we sit down with the persons with disabilities, their families and local community leaders to analyze the interests and talents of the person with a disability and opportunities in their communities...

Juan Carlos and his grandmother know sheep grazing very well. After many consultations, everyone agreed we should help them improve the breed of their sheep herd. Juan Carlos greeted us with frequent smiles and enthusiastic jumps up and down. He immediately showed us the baby sheep in his corral... We do our best to ‘hear His voice’ through our program to bring human dignity to persons living with disabilities.”

Questions for Reflection

How do you recognize Creation, including your own body, as good and beautiful? How can you recognize the dignity of those with disabilities or bodily suffering in your community?

Pray

An Interfaith Litany for Wholeness

Leader: Let us pray for all God's people. For people who are blind and cannot see, and for those who can see but are blind to people around them.

Response: God, in your mercy, help us see each other with your eyes.

Leader: For people who move slowly because of accident, illness or disability, and for those who move too fast to be aware of the world in which they live.
(Response)

Leader: For people who are deaf and cannot hear, and for those who can hear but who ignore the cries of others. (Response)

Leader: For families, friends and caregivers who serve people with disabilities, and for those who feel awkward in their presence (Response)

Leader: For people who think they are worthless and beyond your love, and for people who think they don't need your love. (Response)

Leader: For all the people in your creation, that we may learn to respect each other and learn how to live together in your peace,

Response: God, in your mercy, bind us together.

Amen.

- [Adapted](#) from "That All May Worship: An Interfaith Welcome to People with Disabilities," National Organization on Disabilities, Written by: The Reverend Kate Chips.

Faith in Action

Explore the action opportunities provided by The Arc, an organization dedicated to advancing the human rights of persons with disabilities:
<https://p2a.co/lRPDZ5C>

Maryknoll Mission Experience



"On Fridays, we [a couple of Tanzanian volunteers and I] go to a government program about 15 miles south of Mwanza city that ministers to people suffering from mental illness or some other health problem, such as, being mute, blind or deaf. The locals call this area Bukumbi Camp. My ministry with the residents at Bukumbi is to spend time with them, by treating each person with respect and appreciation for who they are. Jesus says: 'Whatever you do to the least of my brothers and sisters, you do unto me [Matt. 25:37-40].'

"One of the activities that we do with residence is to play 'Bingo.' Bingo is a great game. It pulls us together by helping those who are unable read. When I enter Bukumbi Camp grounds, the residents come to my car to greet my colleagues and myself. They have beautiful smiles and are most welcoming. Although these people live a very simple lifestyle, their desire to make people feel at home is what really matters in their lives. People who visit Bukumbi Camp will feel the presence of the living God."

-BROTHER LOREN BEAUDRY
Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers
(Pictured center back, Tanzania)

Fast

Pay close attention to the needs of your body, through rest, exercise, and healthy eating. Spend this week giving thanks for the gift of being a part of God's creation.



Third Sunday of Lent

"I shall cultivate the ground around it and fertilize it; it may bear fruit in the future."
- Luke 13: 8-9

In the Gospel for this third Sunday of Lent, Jesus speaks of the need for all people to repent of their sins. He tells a parable of a person who owns a fig tree that does not produce fruit for three years. When the man tries to cut it down, his gardener tells him to leave it for another year and carefully cultivate the soil as a final test to see if it can bear fruit.

In examining our lives and repenting for our sins and failings during Lent, we help cultivate the soil of our hearts so that the seeds of God's love can bear fruit in our lives. Our daily practices and choices help us to remain spiritually healthy, otherwise we can become fruitless, like the fig tree.

As a person needs the practices of prayer and repentance to remain spiritually healthy, so likewise a society needs practices, institutions, and systems of justice to create a safe environment for all to flourish. Civil and political rights create safeguards to protect the freedom and dignity of all citizens, particularly the vulnerable.

Catholic social teaching affirms the need for a healthy political life to protect the rights of citizens so they can live freely and flourish. The Compendium of Catholic Social Doctrine states, "The demands of the common good ... are strictly connected to respect for and the integral promotion of the person and [their] fundamental rights. These demands concern above all, [among others,] the commitment to peace, the organization of the State's powers, a sound juridical system..."

One major threat to protecting the civil rights of all people is impunity for human rights violations, or a lack of accountability under law when human rights are flagrantly violated. When systems of law are set up to protect the

state or benefit the powerful, poor and vulnerable people around the world suffer from an inability to seek justice when their rights are seriously violated.

Sr. Maria Zaborowski, MM, works for the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) in Hong Kong. Since its founding in 1984, AHRC has documented human rights abuses and helped victims tell their stories, heal and pursue justice in court. Two of the main objectives of the AHRC are investigating forced disappearances and incidence of torture by agents of the state, which are all-too-common practices in the 11 Asian countries in which they work. As an editor for AHRC, Sr. Zaborowski helps to shed light on the stories of human rights victims and produce documents about their experiences, which can help them seek justice.

"We are tending to the people, ordinary people. Nobody (else) is going to take up their cause," Sr. Maria Zaborowski explains.

"I pray that people become more conscious of human rights and how they are denigrated within societies," she says. "Ordinary people are being oppressed by unjust systems. I see (our work) as mission to people who really need a helping hand."

Questions for Reflection

What practices are helping you to remain spiritually healthy? Where do you see an opportunity to help your society become "healthy?"

Pray

God, you have given all peoples one common origin.

It is your will that they be gathered together as one family in you.

Fill the hearts of humankind with the fire of your love and with the desire to ensure justice for all.

By sharing the good things you give us, may we secure an equality for all our brothers and sisters throughout the world.

May there be an end to division, strife, and war.

May there be a dawning of a truly human society built on love and peace.

We ask this in your name.

- Courtesy of Xavier University

Faith in Action

Urge your Members of Congress to support the Philippines Human Rights Act, which will help address grave human rights abuses against citizens by the Filipino government:
<https://bit.ly/PhilHumRights>

Fast

Consider letting go of habits that prevent you from listening without being defensive and speaking without judgement.



Maryknoll Mission Experience



“For several years, Maryknoll’s Africa Region has worked with the Missionary Community of St. Paul the Apostle in supporting an interethnic primary school on the often-bloody border of Kenya and Ethiopia. Our Lady Queen of Peace Parish lies in a no-man’s land between two hostile pastoralist communities: the Kenyan Turkana and the predominantly Ethiopian Daasanach. The neighbors constantly compete for grazing land and water for the herds, and their rivalry often becomes combat. In 2011, an attack on the village in which the parish church is located left 40 dead and 2000 displaced. In the last decade, violence on a smaller scale has continued.

“Soon after the 2011 tragedy, the parish chose to move from the normalcy of conflict into the uncertainty of interethnic living. The hostile communities now bring their children together in the betwixt-and-between of an abnormal common school. Passing over the threshold of the school, the children, the future of the two communities, mix and become hard to tell apart. They often leave their mother tongues (Turkana and Daasanach) and their national languages (Swahili and Amharic) and converse in the liminal language of English. In the “pure possibility” of the school, the continuity of tradition becomes uncertain. Identities dissolve. A future once taken for granted is thrown in doubt. The mixing creates a fluid, malleable situation in which new friendships, expectations, customs, and institutions begin.”

- FATHER LANCE NADEAU
Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers
(Pictured on the right, Kenya)



Fourth Sunday of Lent

“[The father] said to him, ‘My son, you are here with me always. Everything I have is yours.’”
- Luke 15: 31

For the fourth Sunday of Lent, we hear the powerful parable of the Prodigal Son. In this parable, the younger of two sons takes and squanders his inheritance. On returning home, he expects to be scorned by his father for his behavior, but his father welcomes him with open arms. In response to the jealous, well-behaved older brother, the father explains that everything he owns belongs to both his children.

This parable speaks to the open-hearted abundance and generosity of God. “Everything I have is yours,” the father says.

God has given us the remarkable capacity to be stewards or caregivers of our fellow creatures, to love and honor the gifts of the Earth. But, in the modern world, so often we are irresponsible with what we have been given, destroying what is good and beautiful for the sake of profit, comfort, and convenience. Because our economy in the global North is set up to take endlessly from the Earth without concern over its limits, we live our lives unconsciously contributing to its destruction.

What is the answer? Can we break free from these cycles that trap us in a destructive relationship with the Earth and those who depend on it? Can the voice of God’s mercy, as we hear represented by the father in today’s parable, move us to change our behavior?

Maryknoll Sr. Patricia Ryan is president of the Association for Human Rights and the Environment (DHUMA) in Puno, Peru, an organization of Quechua and Aymara Indigenous working to protect their land rights from extractive industries which exploit the natural environment they have stewarded for centuries.

Sr. Ryan describes the destruction witnessed by Indigenous communities: “ [The Aymara community members said], ‘Please come with us. We want to show you the river.’ We get to a point where you see the river; it’s all contaminated. There’s no doubt that it’s coming from the contamination caused by the mine. Then they tell me about their cattle dying from the mine. This is their livelihood. There’s not only no development brought in by this mine, but no respect for the rights of the people, no respect for Mother Earth. The mine is contaminating the water and causing death to the livestock, which is the livelihood of the communities, and causing sickness and death to the Indigenous peoples.

...The rights of Indigenous peoples must be respected as stipulated in [the UN Convention enshrining Indigenous rights] and the rights of Mother Earth, especially water, must be held sacred. Any profit produced must be distributed equitably, especially in benefit of local, regional and national basic needs and any extractive activity must assure true sustainable development.”

Today, may the voice of the father in the parable remind us of God’s abundant generosity in inviting us to be caregivers of the Earth. May we remember that the gifts of earth are belong equally to all persons, and that all created life is sacred.

Questions for Reflection

Where have you witnessed God’s abundant generosity? How can you take up the invitation to responsibly care for creation?

Pray

God of all creation,

How splendid and majestic is the world you created! It reveals your glory; it teaches us about you.

When you made us in your image, you gave us this command: care for the world and for all the creatures in it, for this is our common home.

Yet your holy creation cries out, for our home is “burdened and laid waste,” scorched and scarred. Come among us that we might remember our interdependence.

Let us see the face of your Son in those who suffer from the destruction of our common home. Help us to be stewards who honor you in the world you have made for the good of all creation and for future generations.

May your justice reign forever! Amen.

-From the [Querida Amazonia Study Guide](#) by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops

Faith in Action

Ask your Senators and Representative to support the FOREST Act of 2021, which would help prevent illegal deforestation and the rights of Indigenous communities: <https://bit.ly/FORESTMogc>

Fast

Fast from technology. Turn off your cell phone, computer, television. Use that time to care for your relationship with God, the earth, yourself, and others. Go for a walk, explore nature, seek out conversation with neighbors, especially those who are lonely.

Maryknoll Mission Experience



“There are 50,000 small Christian communities in Kenya. Different from America, the small Christian communities in Kenya are neighborhood communities, families and neighbors meeting together weekly for prayer. My small community is called St. Kizito, in Nairobi, that’s named after one of the Ugandan martyrs. We are very environment conscious and tuned into ecology. We have been planting trees in the neighborhood. Many people will remember the Kenyan woman who won the Noble Peace Prize for planting trees. We also are involved with cleaning the garbage dumps in the neighborhood. For those of you who have been to countries in the Global South, you know what garbage dumps are like. So why not do it with the unity of the small Christian community? Our final and favorite action is promoting a ban on certain kinds of plastics in Kenya. In fact, Kenya is one of the leaders of the world on this.

“In Africa we like proverbs and one of our favorites is from the Kikuyu people in Kenya, the largest ethnic group, and it says “You must treat the earth well. It was not given to you by your parents. It is loaned to you by your children.”

-FATHER JOSEPH HEALEY
Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers
(Center in picture, Kenya)



Fifth Sunday of Lent

“Then Jesus said, ‘Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on do not sin any more.’”
- John 8: 11

In this Sunday’s Gospel, the Scribes bring before Jesus a woman caught in adultery. When they ask Jesus to condemn her, he says, “Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” After they all depart, Jesus tells the woman he does not condemn her and invites her to go and sin no more.

In various stories throughout Scripture, we hear a similar pattern repeated: a person has an encounter with God’s overwhelming mercy and love, and from that experience is moved to change their life. The experience of mercy proceeds or precipitates transformation.

In many societies around the world, certain groups of people are reviled or made outcasts for having transgressed moral codes, laws, or norms. Two of these groups in particular are victims of sex trafficking and undocumented immigrants. Especially in the United States, undocumented immigrants are condemned as “illegal” and understood as burdens to society. In many countries, victims of sexual exploitation are blamed for having chosen a dirty industry and are seen as permanently damaged.

God’s mercy toward us challenges us to view those who are made outcasts with mercy in return. The fundamental dignity of those whom society rejects demands that not only their human rights be protected, but that they be treated with utmost respect and care.

Maryknoll Sister Helene O’Sullivan works with women in Cambodia who are trying to escape the sex trade. Many of them entered the industry or were sold as sex slaves because of the desperate poverty their families faced. The center Sr. O’Sullivan founded helps give these women education that will allow them to find

well-paying jobs that will allow them to provide for their families.

“We have to change the stigmatism in society,” Sr. Helene says. “[Some people] say there’s always a choice [to enter the sex trade]. I show them that when you are in such dire poverty and the obligation falls to you to help the family... and there’s no way you can get money quickly... So you go to a brothel and get initial money up front; it’s like debt bondage. It’s always this tremendous self-sacrifice... I think it is important to help [the women] to see what they have done for their families, and to reclaim their honor and reclaim their sense of dignity. It is a form of resurrection, indeed it is.”

“There’s a beautiful icon that symbolizes [this transformation],” Sr. O’Sullivan continues. “It’s an icon of Mary... Her whole center, her whole core is empty like the universe but there is the Earth, the moon and you see it, the whole universe is there. When the girls come in [to the educational center] it’s like they come in with one big gaping hole in the center of their being. The thing is to help them to see there’s a whole world inside of you. That nothing has touched your basic dignity as a human being. You deserve so much better.”

Questions for Reflection

When have you experienced God’s transformative mercy? How can you reflect and extend that kind of mercy for others in your family or society?

Pray

A Prayer for the End of Human Trafficking

God of freedom, beauty and truth
we believe that your deepest desire,
your most powerful energy,
is that all creation might know abundant life.

We raise our voices in anguished prayer
for our sisters and brothers,
women and girls, men and boys,
who are modern day slaves;

They are your beloved daughters and sons,
exploited sexually or forced to work
because of human violence and greed.

Fill us with your holy anger and your sacred passion
that those who are trafficked might know healing and
justice; that traffickers will come to repentance and
conversion; that all of us might live in such a way
that others are not made to pay the price
for our comfort and convenience.

Hasten the coming of the day when all people
and our precious Earth itself
will be treated, not as a commodity,
but as radiant images of your freedom, beauty and
truth.

Amen. May it be so.

- From the [Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth,
Convent Station, N.J.](#)

Faith in Action

Visit the U.S. Catholic Sisters Against Human Trafficking [action center](#) to sign a petition, contact your representative, or take other actions against human trafficking.

Fast

Ask your family and friends what breaks their
peace and what brings them peace. Think of a
way you can make a difference for them.

Maryknoll Mission Experience



“Christianity demands justice. Christianity demands our attention and direct action on behalf of any who are denied life in abundance...”

“I take that literally. Working with migrants in immigration jail, locked up simply because they are asking for protection from the U.S. through asylum, demands that I defend their safety and their rights as guaranteed by U.S. law and U.S. legal obligations to international law. But the call to human rights and human dignity demands that we work for infinitely more than minimum conditions or survival. Human dignity refers to respect, access to justice, and life in abundance (Jn 10:10).

“I am an asylum and immigration attorney at the El Paso border with the Mexican city of Juárez. My ministry here is not only to defend asylum seekers and give them a less unfair chance in immigration court, but to really see them as (often) vulnerable, traumatized people who left behind everything they know — their home, family, language, culture — to ask for protection from the United States. I want them to know that I hear and see them and that I defend each person individually.”

- HEIDI CERNEKA,
Maryknoll Lay Missioners
(Pictured in El Paso, Texas)



Palm Sunday

"The centurion... said, 'This man was innocent beyond doubt.'"
- Luke 23: 47

In the Gospel for Palm Sunday, we hear the story of Jesus' betrayal, arrest, trial and death on the Cross.

In the liturgy, as members of the community read various parts in the Passion narrative, we are reminded that Jesus' Passion is ongoing today in the suffering of people around the world. Through our sins, we all contribute to this suffering -- we can identify with Peter, the denier; Judas, the betrayer; Pilate, who turned his attention away; and the frantic crowd.

On this holy day we also recall that in our experience of suffering we are connected to Christ. Jesus, God himself, was debased, reviled, and mocked in the hands of prison guards. His dignity as a person – and, in an incomprehensible way, as God – was denied but not diminished. In the image of Christ on the cross we are reminded of the great dignity of all human life and especially those who suffer and are persecuted.

In meditating on the abuse Jesus faced as a prisoner, we can reflect on the treatment of the incarcerated around the world and the call of Christians to extend mercy and seek reconciliation. Today, the dignity of prisoners is denied through systems that see them only for the crime they have committed, rather than as human persons in need of healing and rehabilitation.

The Compendium of Catholic Social Doctrine states that there is a "two-fold purpose" for a society's justice system: "On the one hand, [the goal is] encouraging the re-insertion of the condemned person into society; on the other, fostering a justice that reconciles, a justice capable of restoring harmony in social relationships disrupted by the criminal act committed."

Maryknoll lay missionary Joanne Blaney works to promote restorative justice practices in the penal system in Brazil. She writes, "[Through my work at the Human Rights and Popular Education Center,] I participated in a project working with the staff and judges in ten State Central Court Houses throughout Brazil to train in Restorative Justice Practices, focusing on promoting a justice that is just for all and one that deals with the collective responsibility of institutions and the state in the structural injustices that lead to mass incarceration and violence.

Each of these ten tribunals now has a Restorative Justice Center that is working to stem the tide of the penal system and trying to restore people and relationships. We also accompany and train groups around Brazil in Community Restorative Justice with a focus on inclusion, respect for the dignity of each person and dialogical practices that strengthen community bonds and collective actions. "

Jesus, though innocent, suffered as a prisoner on his way to the cross. On this Palm Sunday, we can prepare for the joy of Easter by meditating on Jesus' ultimate act of mercy. In seeing Christ in the prisoner, may we work to uphold the rights and dignity of all whom society has rejected.

Questions for Reflection

Which figures do you identify with in the Passion narrative? How is God calling you to take up the work of reconciliation in your life and community?

Pray

“We are still a long way from the time when our conscience can be certain of having done everything possible to prevent crime and to control it effectively so that it no longer does harm and, at the same time, to offer to those who commit crimes a way of redeeming themselves and making a positive return to society. If all those in some way involved in the problem tried to . . . develop this line of thought, perhaps humanity as a whole could take a great step forward in creating a more serene and peaceful society.”

- (Pope John Paul II, July 9, 2000)

Lord, have mercy on us for our lack of commitment to justice and mercy in our own relationships, and in society as a whole.

Renew in those who work in the justice system a zeal for those they encounter, and teach us all to go beyond what justice requires and to extend mercy to others.

Amen.

-From Missionhurst's "[Novena for the Incarcerated](#)"



Faith in Action

In this 20th anniversary year of the opening of the Guantanamo Bay detention center, a site of torture of prisoners by the U.S. government, urge President Biden to take action to close the prison now: <https://bit.ly/3gvi5DF>

Maryknoll Mission Experience



Maryknoll Father Juan Zúñiga operates a ministry in Bolivian prisons that helps inmates learn how to forgive, recognizing that, apart from the crime which they committed, they are each a person on an interior journey. The ESPERE program, which in Spanish stands for “Schools of Forgiveness and Reconciliation,” was initiated in response to the brutal and abusive atmosphere within the prisons.

“When we do not forgive, we are left with feelings of resentment, anger—negative feelings that affect our lives,” says Fr. Zúñiga. “ESPERE is a program that teaches the process of forgiveness. We teach how to recognize and then free ourselves from those negative feelings so that we no longer carry that burden. It is a great help for our brothers and sisters who are incarcerated.”

(Photo: An ESPERE training session)

Fast

When facing a person with whom you are different in some way, put “love your neighbor” into practice by offering an act of kindness. Release your hostages today – forgive people you hold hostage to the past.