

[Columnists](#)
[Young Adult](#)
[Photo Galleries](#)
[Calendars](#)
[Archives](#)
[Column by Archbishop  
Gustavo García-Siller](#)
[Today's Catholic Digital  
Edition](#)

[Home](#) > [Column by Archbishop Gustavo García-Siller](#) > [2014 - Archbishop Gustavo García-Siller Column](#) > ARCHBISHOP'S COLUMN (December 12, 2014)

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## The message that Christmas holds for us

Recently I was invited to celebrate the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist during a Mass at the Connally Unit, a prison near Kenedy. It is about a 90 minute drive from San Antonio. As we traveled south on Route 181, our mood of eager anticipation turned to a reflective silence as we stood in the shadow of the imposing structure that defines this high security prison. Its walls and bars seemed impossible to breach from the inside or out, despite Connally's notable place in Texas history for the breakout of the so-called "Texas Seven." However, not even these walls can stop the power of the Holy Spirit from penetrating the hearts of the inmates we would encounter.

After passing security, we were escorted to a chapel that is uniquely marked with 14 Stations of the Cross. The stations are surprisingly appropriate as they retell the journey of a convicted felon, Jesus Christ, to our redemption; a reminder to these men that their life's journey can lead to their own salvation. There is also a tapestry of a peaceful vision of the Holy Family, displayed in stark contrast to the separation from love and acceptance that must haunt so many of the inmates as each day.

As we entered the chapel, there was an odd air of familiarity; after all, I had been here before. The men waiting for my arrival stepped forward and hugged me with the affection you reserve for a member of the family. I hugged them back, for these inmates are my brothers. More than two dozen of these men would receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit through confirmation. Four would be baptized and 12 would become newly formed disciples of Christ, receiving their first Holy Communion and confirmation.

I was struck by the gratitude so many of them voiced for my specifically naming those who are incarcerated as part of the consecration of the archdiocese to the Holy Spirit at the last Pentecost Vigil. One inmate confided that only a few days later after Pentecost, 22 of the men left the gangs that threaten them to gain their obedience every day. It is apparently easier to escape the gangs on the outside than it when they are confined to these close quarters and the threats that surround them. Yet, these men took the risk that often comes with courageously doing the right thing. However, they acted with the assurance that the power of the Holy Spirit would guide and strengthen them.

Christmas offers all of us a reminder of Gabriel's message to a pure and innocent young girl in Nazareth. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." On this day, without fear, these men are opening up their souls to the possibility of God's Grace with humility and obedience.

As the liturgy unfolded, the chapel was filled with the quiet and remarkably gentle voices of these inmates rose up in song that in a way that provided a peaceful contrast with their rough exteriors. In their faces I could see the expectation that in a moment they would experience a profound and personal encounter with Christ. I prayed that the fruits of these sacraments would be Hope, love, fraternity, and communion. I told them that "While 'outside' of your life — your daily routine here in prison -- will not change, your inner life will change if you make good use of their grace. I confidently assured them that their relationship with God the Father will be deepened; your closeness with the risen Lord Jesus will be stronger; your gifts of the Holy Spirit will be increased; your bond with the Catholic Church will be strengthened; and your witness to Jesus Christ will be more effective."

I wanted them to know that the concrete walls and iron bars of prison could not separate them from the Body of Christ. That what happens inside touches of the community outside. In faith, they are no longer in isolation. If you hurt, we hurt. Just as you pray for us, we pray for you. Their remarkable pilgrimage will be encouraged and enriched by many people who are willing to share their faith and the hope that follows each day. The inmates now rightfully can be called Disciples of Christ, thus share in his calling to be missionaries, proclaiming the Good News with their lives. It won't be easy, but with the help of the Holy Spirit, they need not be afraid.

I share this story as we approach Christmas, so that you will know that Jesus is born in these men. The Holy Spirit, having given them these gifts, nourishing them, allowing their encounter to deepen in love. This is the message that Christmas holds for us, so that we can experience Jesus' saving mercy in our lives, allowing the Grace of God to move us beyond the routine of each day and acknowledge that God is truly doing something new and wonderful in each one of us. This gift that Jesus' gives each of us provides us with new opportunities, setting us forth on new adventures, helping us to imagine new possibilities for our lives. Just as these men at the Connally Unit made a choice, we are each called to choose to be obedient to God's calling.

I pray that by the power of the Holy Spirit Jesus Christ will be born inside you this Christmas. As Mary said to the Lord, in the spirit of humble obedience, may we all say, "Thy will be done." May you have a blessed Christmas.

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