On July 28-30th, 2009 I was privileged, in that I was invited to attend the Orthodox Christian Prison Ministry’s first Convocation in Denver, Colorado. It was a benchmark event that I believe will give birth to a new impetus within the Orthodox Church to minister to men in prison. More than fifty prison-workers from all over the country shared their valuable experience in what will undoubtedly become the groundwork for a more concentrated focus within the Orthodox Church to encourage and equip our churches to become involved in the mandate given to us in Matthew 25. Officials from St. Vladimir’s and St Tikons’ Seminaries where there and talked about new programs that introduce seminarians to this vital work. There are many challenges for our Church to overcome in order to effectively meet the needs of the Orthodox Prisoners incarcerated in America’s prisons. There are a record number of Americans in our corrections systems across the country. In 2007, according to a report released by the Pew Center on the States, the U.S. correctional population - those in jail, prison, on probation or on parole -- totaled 7.3 million, or 1 in every 31 adults. The Pew Center on the States compiled the information from Justice Department and Census Bureau statistics. America's prison population has skyrocketed over the past quarter century. In 1982, 1 in 77 adults were in the correctional system in one form or another, totaling 2.2 million people. The United States has 5 percent of the world's population, but 25 percent of the world's prison inmates, the center said. The numbers vary widely by race and gender. One of the many challenges faced by the Orthodox is the fact that Orthodoxy is not a recognized faith in many of our State’s Prisons and not recognized in any of our Federal Prisons at all. The most difficult challenges however, will be faced in our own churches. Many individuals in our churches have been the victims of violent crime and others simply believe that these prisoners are getting what they deserve. Within American Culture, there is little sympathy for wrong doers. Even some committed Orthodox Christians have trouble forgiving or reaching out to the least of these in our society. One of the most moving talks I was privileged to hear was given by Fr John Kowalczek who is both a pastor and a Forensic Psychologist on staff at St Tikons. He reminded us that Jesus came...
O.C.P.M. Convocation held in Denver, Colorado...Continued from page 1

for the Dismas’s and the Mary Magdelene’s of this world. He reminded us of the verse in Matthew; Matt 9:13 But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. Fr. John also reminded us that we shouldn’t get confused about what we are doing while ministering to these prisoners. We should not be focused on the idea that we are bringing Jesus into these institutions and introducing him to these unfortunates. By doing this, we can get a very high opinion of ourselves. He reminded us that in Matthew 25, it says that we had not visited Him while He was in prison. You see, He is already there! After attending this Convocation, I was re-energized and re-focused. It is my hope to position St. Seraphim’s Fellowship so that we can provide resources and guidance to local parishes that desire to enter into this worthwhile work. I am fortunate to be a member of Holy Cross Antiochian Orthodox Church where our pastor has been involved in Prison Ministry for many years. The men, in prison, that we minister to are actually members of our parish. They are prayed for regularly and their spiritual needs are met with regular confessions and serving of The Presanctified Gifts. I believe that this should be the model for The Church.

S.C.O.B.A. Press Release

Wednesday, August 12, 2009 ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN PRISON MINISTRY "Remember those who are in Prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who suffer evil, as though you yourselves were suffering..." Hebrews 13:3

Press Release August 10, 2009 On July 28, 2009, Orthodox Christian Prison Ministry, the official prison ministry of SCOBA, the Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas, convened its first convocation for Orthodox prison workers in Denver, Colorado. In attendance were 52 Orthodox prison chaplains and volunteers representing 22 states and many Orthodox jurisdictions. Beginning on the evening of the 28th with a vespers service, the convocation featured presentations from Fr. Duane Pederson, founder of OCPM, Fr. Stephen Powley, chaplain at the federal penitentiary in Florence, Colorado, Fr. Emmanuel Mantzouris, correctional chaplain in the New York State correctional system, and Fr. John Kowalczyk, director of pastoral field education at St. Tikhon's Orthodox Theological Seminary. Also presenting were Carla Thomas, M.D., who provides medical care to prisoners in the Alabama state correctional system, and Dennis Dunn, who runs a re-entry program in Atlanta, GA. Of particular interest to attendees was the presentation made by Chaplain Patrick Tutella, Executive Director of OCPM, about the Lazarus Project, a mentoring-based re-entry and reintegration program he developed in Berks County, Pennsylvania. A highlight of the convocation was a presentation made by Jason Irwin, a graduate of the Lazarus Project and a convert to Orthodoxy. In addition to these presentations, attendees were given the opportunity to share their own ministry experiences. The exchange of ideas that flowed from these presentations was remarkable.

Also in attendance at the convocation were Fr. John Behr, Dean of St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, and Jeff Citro, Director of the Office of Social Ministry at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Theological Seminary. OCPM was particularly honored to have in attendance Soren Johnson and Peter Walker, representing Prison Fellowship International, an organization with whom OCPM has had a long and fruitful relationship.

The convocation culminated with a Divine Liturgy celebrated on the morning of July 30, the feast of the Holy Apostle Silas, patron saint of OCPM. OCPM brings the light of Christ to those who are in prison in North America by providing encouragement, material support, transition and reintegration services, Christian education, spiritual guidance and the sacramental life of the Church to prisoners and their families. OCPM is a tax-exempt, 501 (c) (3) not-for-profit organization. Donations to this vital ministry may be sent to P.O. Box 468, Fleetwood, PA, 19522-0468, and are tax-deductible.

ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN PRISON MINISTRY * A SCOBA AGENCY*
Why Minister to Prisoners?

Our life in this world is a fierce and violent spiritual war. As St. Paul says, we struggle not “against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wicked ness in the heavenly places.” Not only are we participants in this warfare, we are also its prize. We are the crown of God’s creation, created in His image and likeness, the only creature created for the sole purpose of glorifying God by hav ing fellowship with Him. So the devil, being a created being and therefore pow erless to attack God directly, attacks God by attacking that which is most dear to Him: us. “[Our] adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.” his only goal is to destroy and enslave as many of God’s precious children as he can before his time comes to an end, and our role as Christians, as “partakers of the divine nature” and participants in the High Priesthood of Christ, is to do everything in our power to prevent the devil from taking one more soul to Hell with him. This is the war we are in, and this war is our raison d’etre: we were created to be in un ion with God, and we come into union with God by doing His will. Christ, who came “to seek and to save that which was lost”, desires “all men to be saved, and come to the knowledge of the truth.” In uniting us to Himself, God has given us the privilege and obligation of participating in His saving work, of fighting in this war against the devil and his angels. Our weapon in this war is Christ Himself. “[For we], being dead in [our] tres passes,…He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven [us] all trespasses, having wiped out the hand writing of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, hav ing nailed it to the cross. Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, tri- umphing over them in it.” When Christ is present, the demons are utterly defeated. We fight this war, and win it, by bringing the presence of Christ and His saving power to those who are estranged from Him.

One of the places of most profound and widespread estrangement from Christ is prison. Prison is a true stronghold of the devil: a place of darkness and violence populated by people who, due to the weak ness of their flesh, have not refrained from their sinful behavior, even when facing earthly consequences as dire as imprisonment. If the Church is, as it has aptly been called, the hospital of the soul, prisoners are very often the critical cases. All of us “have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God”; all of us have, like the unjust servant in Matthew 18, been forgiven of a debt we could never repay and have thereby been saved from the eternal punishment we deserve; all of us would go straight to hell were it not for the grace of God which has been offered to us in Jesus Christ, a grace we absolutely do not deserve. We on the outside occupy no moral high ground from which to cast stones at those who are incarcerated, because we are all ensnared in the same mire of sin, in need of the same salvation. The only difference between those of us on the outside and those who are inside is that those who are inside have largely been abandoned by the outside world, including by those of us who call ourselves Christians. Too often we Christians are like the priest and the Levite who passed by the wounded man without offering help, when we should be imitating the Good Samaritan.

Of course, it is not only prisoners who suffer as a result of their incarceration: very often, the prisoner’s family is impacted even more negatively by the prisoner’s bad decisions than is the prisoner himself. Each year, hundreds of thousands of families are torn apart by the incarceration of a parent, spouse or child. These innocents need the love of Christ as desperately as their incarcerated loved ones. This is espe cially true of the children. Without the loving intervention of Christ in their lives, many of these little ones will internalize the horror of their childhoods and grow up into a life of crime and incarceration just like their parents’.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 6 >>>>
Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In the Gospel of Matthew chapter 25 our Lord teaches us that ministry to those in prison is a good and even necessary work on the same level with visiting the sick, feeding the hungry and clothing the poor. According to this passage of scripture visiting those in prison is a ministry to Jesus Christ himself. “Assuredly I say to you, in as much as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:40) Visiting those in prison, however, is not something all of us can literally do. Thankfully, there are those who feel especially called and equipped to do this ministry in behalf of us all.

St. Seraphim’s Fellowship is one such group. This group ministers by mail to over 150 inmates in over 11 prisons. In addition to this, James (Seraphim) Blackstock personally visits with inmates on Florida’s “Death Row” and in 3 separate maximum security prisons in Florida. Each facility he visits is over 50 miles from his home. The men ministered to by mail and those visited receive the Good News of Christ. They are introduced to and (when desired) taught the Orthodox Christian Faith. Many of these inmates have been brought into full communion with Christ through His Holy Church.

As a parish priest in Central Florida I have been involved in prison ministry for over 14 years. At one time I was visiting inmates in 3 different Florida Correctional Institutes, but for the last few years, because of time restraints, I have limited my visits just to one facility. At this facility we have an Orthodox group of around 20 men. This number fluctuates as the men are moved and even on occasion released. I have tried to visit weekly to teach, to hear confessions and at least once a month take the reserved sacraments to the men who have become Orthodox. As my parish grows it has become increasingly hard to get to the prison. Over the years I have tried to get help with this. This has never worked out to any satisfaction until now. Now James has stepped in to help. He visits with the men at Tomoka Correctional Institute once a week. Right now he is leading the men in a study of the Orthodox teaching on the passions. To do this he travels over 50 miles each way. With James’ help, I am able to visit with the men only once a month to bring the Pre-sanctified Gifts and to hear confessions.

The work of James and St. Seraphim’s Fellowship is a ministry in behalf of us all. It is a wonderful, good and necessary ministry that we all need to participate in. One of the ways we can all participate in this work is to support it financially. Though the work of James and his helpers at St. Seraphim’s fellowship is all voluntary and done out love for the Lord and in service to fellow men, there are several expenses involved in this work such as: postage, literature, printing, office supplies, and fuel costs (for James’ travel from home to facility and from one facility to another) and other expenses as well. Please consider helping with a donation now and on a regular basis as you are able. Donations should be mailed to Holy Cross Orthodox Church;

Address: 375 Fleming Ave. Ormond Beach, FL 32174 Please make checks payable to Holy Cross and designate donation for St. Seraphim’s Fellowship.

In Joy of Christ,

Fr. Michael Byars
Holy Cross Antiochian Orthodox Church
Ormond Beach, Florida
Letters for the Other
by Jane G Meyer

All my life I’ve enjoyed words. Stories and letters, papers and articles—words in almost any form have been an important part of my life. When I lived in Europe as a young woman, there was a period of time when I wrote so many letters to friends and family that I refuse to reveal how many! Words help me learn about the world and process my adventures. I love letters so much that my first novel for young adults is written in that format. It’s an epistolary novel, where two girls communicate their story: their adventures, fears, and thoughts through frequent letters to one another.

So when I heard about the call to write to prisoners, I immediately inquired, asking my priest for his okay to embark on this new writing adventure. I figured I’d jump into this ministry and really be able to crank out some well-honed works of letter art, and help someone learn about the Orthodox faith at the same time. Seemed like an easy, and even enjoyable, feat to me.

As a writer I do know that effective storytelling can be a powerful learning tool. Personal stories are a wonderful vehicle to teaching truths, so I decided from the start that I would write about the current liturgical season highlighting what was happening in our church and in our home, trying to reveal details that would allow the prisoner to really sense the power of a particular season. The leaders of this ministry have told me more than once that the prisoners long for a human connection, a glimpse to the outside, so I’ve tried to make the prisoner feel as though he was in our home, having dinner as a guest, or standing next to us in church. If it’s Lent, I write about what we’re eating, about how we struggle to bring the family more often to the altar to pray, how the church services are lengthened, about how the bells on the censors are removed and how I miss that jingling sound, how I long for it and long for Pascha.

But these letters have been more difficult than I’d anticipated. Though words flow easily from my pen, they are more often than not crossed out and replaced with new ones. I struggle with being a woman, and writing to a once violent man. I’ve chosen not to reveal my given name, and steer away from details that might allow me to be identified easily. I believe I would feel differently if my name wasn’t so connected with three small children and a husband, or if I weren’t so very “google-able” but it is—and I am.

But these struggles are all about me! And this ministry is the antithesis of me, it’s about the other. It’s about reaching out even when you’re uncomfortable. It’s about creating a bond with the enemy, with an outcast, with someone who knows that the executioner is on the way. Someone who needs Christ and His Church so very desperately. I will never be able to fully understand this man’s sufferings, but I can try to place myself aside just for a moment and be a friend, a real friend, who will be overjoyed at finding him walking the streets of Paradise. I want to be the kind of friend who would set a place for him at the table. I want to be a Saint Brigid to him—generous and open. I’m trying...

Though my relationship with the prisoner is still only budding, I’m hopeful of what these letters can provide. This ministry has very little to do with being a writer. There is no pre-requisite for one to punctuate properly or spin a good tale. What this ministry needs is not proven authors, but people who are willing to open their lives to men who are broken and searching. Just like I’m broken, and searching, it’s no wonder his words have been as much a comfort to me—as I pray mine have been to him...

I ask your prayers.
**Into the Light**  
BY: Thomas Rigterink

My name is Thomas Rigterink. I’m writing this from an isolation cell in the Polk County Jail. I have spent the last 8 months in a 6x9 cell with no windows, no T.V., and no radio. Currently I am waiting on the U.S. Supreme Court to decide whether to uphold the Florida’s Supreme Court’s decision to grant me a new trial. Prior to my stay here, I spent almost four years on Death Row at Florida State Prison. I was arrested in 2003 and sentenced to death in 2005. I am not guilty of the crimes for which I was sentenced to death. What I am guilty of is ignoring God and walking in darkness.

So, let me tell you about my journey and how Death Row has saved my life. I’ll bet you didn’t see that coming, did you? I was in my last semester in college when I was arrested. I had two classes left until I would have received my B.S. in Biology with honors. My involvement with drugs led me to associations I had no business having. As I said before, I was walking in darkness and living a completely self-centered life. I ended up in a situation I couldn’t control and didn’t have a clue how to handle. I was arrested as a result. I had never before had a run in with the law. I was scared and stupid and didn’t know what to do or who to turn to. My first night in jail, I was put into a cell with a guy who had “MISERY” tattooed across his chest and diamonds over his eyes (like an evil clown). Oh boy, I thought, here we go. The next day, I was pulled out of my cell, by myself, to go to arraignment. As I was waiting, a huge guy, covered in tattoos, called me over to his cell. Again I thought, Oh boy, here we go. What he said floored me. He said…”I was just praying and God said to tell you not to worry. He is in control.” To say I was not expecting that would be an understatement. I was floored, and at the same time, felt a weight being eased from my shoulders. That was my first glimpse of the light. To shorten a long story, a bit, I’ll simply say that jail was tough. I saw people stabbed, with their throats cut, and all manner of evil inflicted. I was, however, not affected by any of this. I was beginning to read the Bible and to study the message of God. Through God’s blessing I was protected and encouraged.

I’ll liken that stage of my journey to being stranded in New York City with a destination in mind but with no directions and an inability to communicate. In other words, still lost. After 2 years, and a trial, I was sentenced to death. My faith, while lacking direction, was strong as was the support of my family and friends. I knew I was in God’s Hands. Death Row, was where I gained direction and understanding.

On Death Row, we are housed in 6x9 cells and are locked down 23+ hours a day. We see only the guards and the volunteer chaplains that come through on a day to day basis. One day, James Blackstock, from St. Seraphim’s Fellowship, was passing by my cell and stopped to talk. We had a brief conversation and as he prepared to move on, he asked about my family. I’m not sure if he remembers this or not, but when he asked about them, I said they were awesome! That stopped him in his tracks and led to a deeper conversation. By the end of our visit, he asked if I would be interested in receiving letters about the Orthodox Church and the various passions. I said sure and began to receive the information regarding the passions and how without submitting to God, they led to sin. I was finally getting some direction from these letters. I started seeing James on a regular basis. We were able to talk about the letters and the Orthodox Church. The light was beginning to overcome the darkness.

James was patient in answering questions and generous with his time. Since we were locked down, we had no opportunities to go to chapel or church. My only source of contact with the Church was through these visits and the many letters from St. Seraphim’s. The more I read, the brighter the light shown in my life. I was now committed to God and wanted to walk with Jesus Christ. Now we get to the part where Death Row saved my life. On October 17, 2008 (almost 5 years to the day of my arrest) I was Baptized and Chrismated into the Holy Eastern Orthodox Church with James Blackstock as my sponsor. I took the name of Nektarios, in part because this wonderful saint of God was falsely accused. Due to the persistence and generosity of James in what was certainly a hostile environment, I was born again as a true child of God. The light now shines brightly in my life. It is not always easy, but I have more good days than bad. This comfort comes from the knowledge that God is in control and I am in His hands.

Confirmation that I made the right choice came from an unlikely source. I had just returned from speaking with my attorney when the Wing Sergeant named Anderson asked me some questions. How is it that I get to leave everyday at 4:30 PM and you seem to have a better outlook than me? I replied, let me tell you about my faith. We continued to talk, on and off, for several months. Before he was transferred to another prison, he came by my cell, with tears in his eyes, shook my hand and said, “I’m glad I got the chance to meet you!” Now you know how death row saved my life. Maybe not physically, but certainly, spiritually. Life on earth is a drop in the bucket, but what comes next is eternal. Had it not been for the willingness of James Blackstock to visit Florida State Prison, I would still be walking in the shadows. If there is any doubt that such a prison ministry is vital, don’t take my word for it. Simply read Matthew 25: 21-46.
Who is Jason?  

BY: Seraphim

The officers opened the heavy barred door and let me into the cellblock, the steel door closed behind me with a clank. I began my walk down the row. The floor was damp and littered with debris thrown out from the cells by the prisoners. Some of the men were standing at the bars looking at me as I passed by, some with a smile on their face, happy to see anyone, others with a look of anger and despair. I greeted each man as I walked by their cells and tried to offer encouragement to some and spent time with those who receive the teaching letters from our ministry. Suddenly I was stopped in my tracks by the Holy Spirit in front of one man’s cell.

I looked into the cell and saw a man paralyzed from the chest down, wearing a bag for elimination and struggling with great difficulty to pull himself from the bunk to his wheelchair. In his eyes you could see the look of total desperation, anger and despair. Jason had been on Death Row for three years and no longer felt like a man. He confided in me that he was plagued with hellish nightmares about the day that he was shot thirteen times and left for dead. He told of how he had lost all hope in God and no longer trusted anyone. He said that he didn’t want to live anymore.

In my heart I could feel how much God loved this man and wanted to save him. I began to visit him regularly and mailed out to him the teaching letters on the passions. We grew closer. We had many intense and tearful talks and I taught him about the prayer of the heart. His nightmares went away. His countenance changed and his eyes took on a soft look of one who has found the Pearl of Great Price. That was more than one year ago, and now Jason is a catechumen whose Baptism is now being scheduled.

Jason has found new meaning for his life in this man made hell and has learned to forgive himself and others for whom he has held deep resentments for many years. He is back in touch with his family. He has come to love writing poetry and has much talent as an artist. Jason has told me that now, because of what God has done for him, he wants to share the faith he has found with his fellow prisoners. What a miracle! How great is Our God! I could tell many stories like this one, stories of men rescued from the jaws of hell, spared from loneliness and total despair. Men who have regained trust and now have their hope in God restored to them. These precious souls are now back on the Ladder of Divine Assent.

I thank God each day for my brothers and sisters in the Lord who make it possible for me to go to these men. Please make an investment in this ministry, stand with us shoulder to shoulder, as we cry out to God….saying “send me”

 Isa 6:8
 Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me.

News from St. Seraphim’s Fellowship:

**November 18th** - Fr. Michael & Seraphim bring the Pre-Sanctified Gifts to the men at Tomoka C.I.

**November 14th** - William Vassiliou (cradle Orthodox) an inmate at Florida State Prison enters St. Seraphim’s Fellowship and begins to receive the study of the passions.

**November 12th** - Randy Shoenwetter is received into St Seraphim’s Fellowship as a new catechumen. Randy is an inmate at Union Correctional Institution

**November 12th** - Visited with Roy Ballard at Florida State Prison. His health is failing and he cannot eat. He has had recent eye surgery. Please pray for him.

**November 4th** - Passions Study at Tomoka Correctional Institution
   With 20 inmates

**October 1st, 3rd, 7th, 14th, 21st, 22nd, 24th and 28th** - Regular visitations and study classes at three different institutions.

**September 2nd, 3rd, 5th, 9th, 16th, 17th, 18th, 23rd, 30th** - Regular visitations and study classes at three prisons

August 29th - Prayer request for inmate Roy Ballard who has just had Eye Surgery and has lost all of his property.

August 27th - Seraphim is back on the road visiting prisoners after a three month hiatus due to mechanical failure of the ministry’s only vehicle.

August 27th - Duane Owen was received as a new Catechumen. Duane is an inmate at Union Correctional Institution in Florida

August 27th - St Seraphim’s Fellowship receives grant to obtain a new Laser Printer for it’s growing ministry.

August 26th - Prayer request for inmate Jason Wheeler who is undergoing surgery for removal of Gall Stones

August 25th - Welcome!! Faith, Lynn, and Dori. New letter writing Volunteers ~ Anyone else?

July 1st - One year memorial for Mark Schweb who was received into the Church and Chrismated thirteen days before his execution. He was executed on July 1, 2008

Suddenly I was stopped in my tracks by the Holy Spirit in front of one man’s cell. I looked into the cell and saw a man paralyzed from the chest down.
On our prayer list

St. Seraphim’s Fellowship needs the following major items:

- a newer, more reliable and fuel efficient vehicle
- updated Computer System and Software

Please pray that God will meet these needs

We have an ongoing need for office supplies, postage, gasoline, prayer ropes, books and bibles. Please consider making an investment in this ministry.

We're on The Web!
www.stseraphim.webs.com/

Why Minister to Prisoners?...Continued from page 3

The spiritual needs of prisoners and their families are profound and largely unmet. When Jesus evangelized the Samaritan Woman at the well, and told his disciples to do the same to the Samaritans in her town, they probably thought it was strange that the Lord would tell them to proclaim the Gospel to people who were seemingly so different from themselves. Today, the fields of the American penal system are white for harvest, and we must begin to labor in that harvest, even though that means entering a world which is totally foreign to most of us. When describing the Last Judgment in Matthew 25, the Lord specifically mentions five behaviors that manifest a life lived in accordance with His will: Feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, taking in strangers, caring for the sick, and ministering to those in prison. Now, the Lord was not saying, “Do these things and you’ll get into heaven.” He was saying that a person who is living a life that is truly filled with the Spirit, who is striving to live his life in accordance with the Gospel and in submission to the will of God, will naturally manifest these behaviors as the love of God that is poured out in his heart overflows to those around him. One day, all of us will stand before the Throne of Judgment. Let us pray that, when that time comes, we can answer that we did, indeed, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, take in the stranger, care for the sick, and minister to those in prison.

[This excerpt was taken from the O.C.P.M. website]