

St. Mark Church remembers prisoners' children at Christmas

written by Special to Arkansas Catholic |



In Matthew 25:36, 40, Jesus said, "I was in prison, and you came to visit me.... I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."

The parishioners of St. Mark Church in Monticello not only know the Lord's charge but also live it.

The parish hosts an annual Angel Tree at Christmas, but since 2007, the gifts collected are for children with incarcerated parents. In December, the church provided 57 children with gifts, a winter coat and personal message from their mom or dad, as well as a ham to each of the 33 families who registered.

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St. Mark Church began its program 17 years ago when Father Phillip Reaves, director of prison ministry for the Diocese of Little Rock, began serving the parish as pastor and brought the idea with him. Parishioners Sara and Steve Hartness ran the program for its first 16 years before handing it over to Mary Williams in 2022.

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Gregory Borse helped charter the parish's Knights of Columbus council in 2015 and got it involved in the Angel Tree Program the following year by adding the coat drive and gift and ham delivery.

"One of the unique things about the Angel Tree program is that the prisoners themselves get to write down what specific gifts they would like to give to their children that they know and they love, and we go purchase those. We don't just get random stuff," Borse said. "That aspect is the best part of it. Rather than just being sort of a generic, 'Let's give these kids something because their parents can't,' it comes with a message from dad or mom. It adds a certain specialness to their holiday. The children don't have a choice in this, and they are suffering in a way that most of us can't understand."

"When you walk up to a house where they're not expecting anything, and you're able to drop the stuff off, there's a lot of joy. Sometimes there are tears, and it's very gratifying. It's a wonderful opportunity for us to do corporal works of mercy right here in our own backyard."

The Angel Tree Program is a ministry of Prison Fellowship, the nation's largest Christian nonprofit serving prisoners, former prisoners and their families. One in 49 children in the United States has a parent behind bars, so the program lets them know that their parent in prison loves them and has not forgotten them.

"Our whole church is involved 100 percent," Williams said. "We get our list of the kids and their location at the beginning of November, and our parishioners, they just get so involved. Our Knights of Columbus do the coat drive. The parish buys the hams. Some families join forces and adopt more than one child or family. They donate gifts or money so we can go shopping, buy new coats and things. Then we wrap each family's presents in the same wrapping paper, organize and label boxes for delivery, and our Knights distribute them to families within a 30-mile radius of Monticello the week before Christmas."

Ray Ruble, grand knight of the parish's council, said the look of joy and appreciation on the faces of the children and, especially, their caregivers makes the program worthwhile.

"It's definitely very rewarding," he said. "As Christians and Catholics, we're all family. The parish at St. Mark's is incredibly loving, incredibly giving. If we have a set goal of how many kids we need to take care of, the parish always goes above and beyond with donations for anything that's needed. It's definitely shown in the Angel Tree Project."

"It's God's work," Williams said. "I mean, that's what we're here for. We're here to do God's work and spread his word. We're thinking about the kids. They're innocent. They didn't ask to be in this situation. We're just hoping, even being away from their mom or dad, that they have a good Christmas."