



Columban Sisters Worldwide Mission News

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THE WOMEN WE SELDOM SEE

By Sr. Mary Anthony Ryan

Sr. Mary Anthony Ryan shared this account in 2010, but still cares for the female prison inmates of Hong Kong, where she has served since 1976.

My work at various places around Hong Kong requires that I spend many hours of each week travelling. Any day can find me moving by bus, 16-seater minibus, taxi, train, tram and ferry. Some days, I use a combination of these modes of transport. Of course every day I also use the “Number 11 bus,” the Chinese euphemism for travel by foot.

My longest journey entails two bus rides and two ferry rides, one way. This brings me to a place of great natural beauty, an isolated area on the eastern side of outlying Lantau Island. The largest of all the islands that comprise Hong Kong, Lantau is known for its impressive modern International Airport located in Chek Lap Kok.

However, my destination is not the International Airport, nor the relatively new Disneyland



which is also close by. No, I make my way to two correctional institutions for female prisoners. At these centers—far removed from the bustle of the airport and the fun of Disneyland—I visit the women to offer them a listening ear and a caring heart. I count on the responsible welfare officers to make arrangements for the women to speak to me in confidence.

There are several hundred women in this isolated setting, and I meet with inmates from far and near. Each one has her own story: stories of hurt and betrayal, but also stories of courage, endurance and hope. Many of these women are from neighboring countries in

Southeast Asia; they come to Hong Kong looking for work. It may be that their papers are forged, or that they overstay their time, or they have no work permit. Whatever the reason, they end up in prison.

Often these women are the breadwinners of their families, and not only their own immediate family, but also extended members including cousins, in-laws and their families as well. At times, these women even support neighbors. I am reminded of the Chinese saying, “Women hold up half the world.”

Sadly, for their efforts, these imprisoned women suffer greatly—tormented by thoughts of their children and families. They fear how loved ones are coping (for they know the ones left behind will struggle to survive) and they feel shame at their present plight. It is little wonder that they have trouble sleeping at night, especially in dormitories which can be stifling in the humidity of Hong Kong.

I think of Daisy. She is far from



her own country. This is her second time in Hong Kong only to find herself imprisoned here. Living and working under a false name, desperately trying to make money, she fell afoul of the authorities. Her greatest suffering is concern for her family of seven as her parents are unable to earn a living. She knows they are without the dollars she used to send them. Daisy's grandmother died while she was in prison. One night she had a dream in which this beloved grandmother spoke comfortingly to her, encouraging her not to lose heart.

Then there is Alice, a mother of three young children who supported her in-laws in addition to her own parents. Her tears never seem to stop and her sorrow actually causes her great physical pain in the muscles of her face, mouth and head. Suffering too from chronic back pain, Alice finds it hard to move around. One day, through her tears and pain, she said to me, "Thank you. You heard me.

You let me cry."

Tida, in her late twenties, has fled horrific conflicts in her own country. She is so traumatized she cannot speak of the horrors endured by her people. She doesn't know where her family is or how they are faring. As for herself, she can't even imagine a future, and wonders where she will go and where she might live in safety. Sometimes all I can do is sit with Tida in silence, praying for her to the One who knows the innermost pain and anguish of our hearts.

Finally, there is Ah Jeung. She is 30 years old with two children of eight and six. Her hard life began when she was sent out to work at the age of 13. Separated from her husband, she worries about her children and wants them to have a father. A strong resilient woman, she has grown in self-knowledge as we talked together. "You gave me a gift in my spirit," she told me, "better than any present you could have brought me."

Though they are considered outcasts, I am humbled by these women. I am humbled by their ongoing courage in the face of many, many difficulties. I long to help them see their special place in the heart of God, to help them grow, even in their incarceration, and realize their true potential. Pray, that out of the few crumbs I have to offer, the Lord will make a nourishing meal.

Support for Prison Ministries & Other Places in Need

In 2006, Hong Kong was identified by the International Centre for Prison Studies as having the highest proportion of female prisoners in the world with women comprising 22% of the city's penal population. The female prison outreach conducted by the Columban Sisters in Hong Kong is one of three such outreach missions in distant lands. The Sisters also minister to women inmates in Chile and Peru. With your donations, you support efforts such as these as well as other critical mission work in 12 countries around the world.

For more information, visit www.columbansisters.org, call the Columban Sisters Mission Office at 716-934-4515, or email missionoffice@stcolumbanhome.org. Contributions can be made using the enclosed envelope or by contacting the Mission Office.