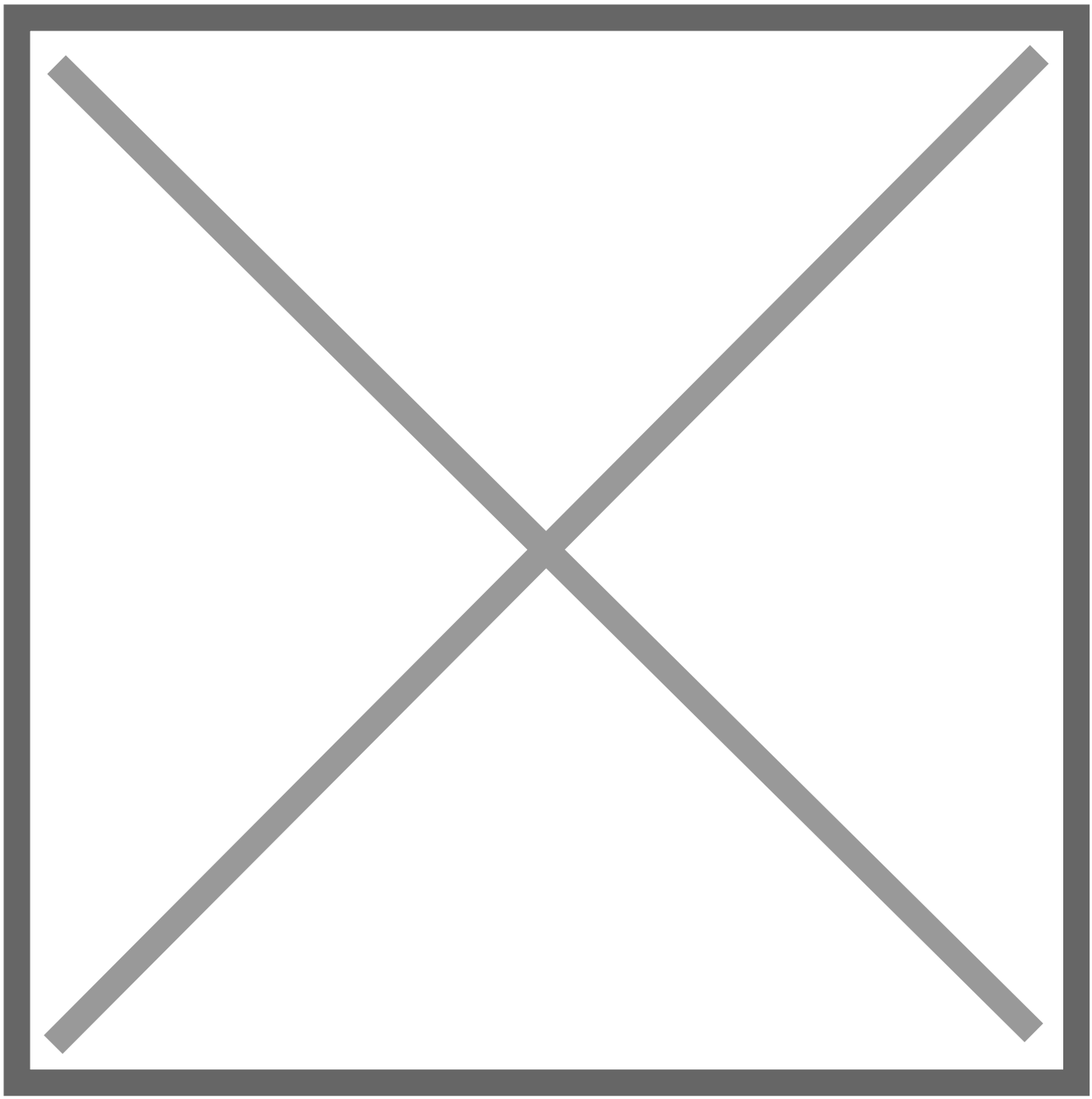
News



Bishop James F. Checchio of Metuchen, N.J., celebrates Mass at Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women in Clinton, N.J., in this 2019 file photo. (CNS/The Catholic Spirit/Ed Koskey Jr.)



by Catholic News Service

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The women housed at the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility in Clinton, the only women's prison in the state of New Jersey, seem to have the cards stacked against them.

Already facing isolation, suspended visitations and restricted gatherings — all to minimize the potential spread of the coronavirus and exposure to it — the women incarcerated there are facing another challenge: the fear of abuse.

In the early morning hours of Jan. 12, just nine months after the U.S. Justice Department issued a report denouncing past abuse at the prison, calling the abuse of the women there "severe and prevalent," two women were reported to have been allegedly assaulted and several others were victims of abuse inflicted by corrections officers.

Bishop James F. Checchio of Metuchen, who has made regular past visits to the prison to meet and pray with the women there, called the situation "dire" and the offenses against the women "disgusting and shameful."

In a letter shared with local media, Catholics of the diocese, the prison administrator and the chaplain supervisor, Checchio wrote that "no person, no matter their past offenses nor circumstance in life, should have to endure such abuse."

The offenses, he wrote, "alleged to have been perpetrated by the prison officers, the very people charged with protecting the women in their custody, are terrible. This sad, ongoing situation calls to mind other failures and lack of responsibility by those in authority, even not unlike past failings by some of our own church's leaders and members of clergy."

"I pray that those in authority over the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women, who bear the weight of caring for and protecting the lives of those imprisoned, will honestly assess any failings and implement the proper measures so that each person there is treated as a child of God, worthy of inherent dignity," the bishop wrote.

Situated in the rolling hills of Hunterdon County, one of the four counties that make up the Diocese of Metuchen, the prison currently houses about 380 women in three compounds and has reportedly been plagued by violence and abuse for years.

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One person in the Diocese of Metuchen knows the plight of the women there especially well, the bishop said in his letter: Anthony P. Kearns III, chancellor of the diocese.

Before he was named to the diocesan post, Kearns worked to combat abuse at the women's prison as the Hunterdon County prosecutor for about nine years. He prosecuted claims of abuse at the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women. He said that while institutional change can take time, the abuse happening there cannot be tolerated.

With 10 jails and prisons in Middlesex, Somerset, Hunterdon and Warren counties, Checchio said the diocese is fortunate to have several prison ministries to tend to incarcerated people.

Yet, he said he is "mindful that each of us is commissioned to practice the corporal works of mercy, to care for the imprisoned and to protect all human life."

"We have a shared responsibility — as Catholics, as Christians, and as brothers and sisters united in one human family — to defend the rights and dignity of all people," the bishop wrote.

"It is on this very same foundation of our faith, by which we are emphatically reminded that we are all equally made in the image and likeness of God," he continued, "that we advocate for the unborn, for those facing the injustice of racism, for those confronting a terminal illness who feel compelled to choose assisted suicide, and for so many others who all too often are excluded, marginalized, or are

in any other way disenfranchised.

"Sadly, this respect for life seems to be lessening in our society."

As the women await relief, as the prison awaits reform and as the public awaits answers, Checchio encouraged prayer — for those suffering from abuse and for those with the authority to prevent it.

"We cannot be indifferent to their pain and suffering. We must strive to see more clearly the face of God in each of our brothers and sisters, regardless of their origin, race, religion, vulnerability, or past choices," he wrote.

"May we each be reminded of our Father's unconditional and unfailing love for us and, in turn, offer that same love, without condition and without exception, to all whom we encounter," he added.