

(Unsplash/Caleb Sharpe)



by Patrick O'Neill

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While the difficulties associated with COVID-19 are omnipresent, the hardships are even greater for those of us in prison. Matthew's Gospel notes the work of mercy: "I was in prison and you visited me." The problem for the thousands of men and women in prison is many of us are on "lockdown." That's a penal term for essentially keeping prisoners confined to small areas such as cellblocks or individual cells. During lockdown no visitation is permitted.

This can be done for disciplinary reasons or preemptively, as was the case in many prisons that locked down without cause the week of Joe Biden's inauguration.

Here at Federal Correctional Institution Elkton in Ohio, where I am serving a 14-month sentence for participating in the 2018 anti-nuclear-weapons protest at Kings Bay Naval Base in Georgia, the prison has been under lockdown for more than a year. What that means for the incarcerated is that we are confined to crowded cellblocks of 64 cinder block cubicles 24 hours a day, seven days a week amid noisy, overcrowded conditions and without privacy.

In my case, my block includes a range of 110-120 men living in a room with bodies always in constant motion as men move about looking to pass time in meaningful ways. Most shuffle around in slapping flip flops. Many guys speak too loudly and there's a public address system where guards make shrieking, sometimes shocking, announcements throughout the day. The sensory overload is relentless, something akin to low-level torture.

The lockdown means my wife, Mary Rider, and our eight children, two sons-in-law and two grandchildren are not allowed to visit me. But I've only been here since Jan. 14. The other guys on my block, many who have been here for up to 10 years or more, have not seen loved ones in more than a year.



Federal Correctional Institution Elkton in Ohio (Wikimedia Commons/Roseohioresident)

We are let out for "rec" two or three times a week, but all we can do is walk or jog for an hour on a cement walkway or in the ice and snow that covers a gravel walking path that has been obscured since my arrival. The lockdown means we eat our meals in our cubicles, not in the chow hall; all programs, including 12-step programs, are shut down. The prison dentist is not offering teeth cleanings or fillings, and all religious services have been canceled for more than a year.

An end to the lockdown is nowhere in sight, and whenever I ask medical staff about the COVID-19 vaccine, I am told there's no plan in place to give inmates the vaccine. This, in spite the fact that hundreds of Elkton inmates and staff have been infected with COVID-19, resulting in nine prisoner deaths, according to an attorney representing prisoners with underlying health issues who asked to be moved last spring.

I turn 65 on March 27. I had filed a motion with my judge to delay my reporting to prison until after I received the COVID-19 vaccine; the motion was denied.

The lockdown also means Catholic prisoners have now been without the sacraments for more than a year. (This was confirmed by William Barber, coordinator of prison ministry for the Youngstown Diocese, who told NCR in an email that due to COVID-19, "priests, deacons and volunteers have not been able to go into Elkton for a bit over a year.")

Pastoral visits are by appointment only. I received one this week from the Lutheran chaplain, the Rev. Scott Kirchoff, in response to a written request I had filed two months ago. The chaplains do not come into the locked down units to make visits.

I asked Kirchoff if he could arrange for the Catholic inmates to receive the Eucharist on Easter. He said he doubted he could get anyone to come in to bring the Eucharist, and that the "administration" is not letting "anyone" into the prison anyway. He said if the Catholics got the Eucharist then all faith groups would have to also have their needs met as well. (He actually mentioned "sweat lodges" as one of the demands he might receive.) He was a nice man, but said it was out of his hands because of the lockdown.

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Since prison guards and other staff pass in and out of this place on a 24-hour basis, I don't see why a nun, deacon, priest, bishop or layperson can't come into the prison with the Blessed Sacrament. It could even be in an open-aired setting for easy social distancing. Why should men in a low-security federal prison have to go through Holy Week without the sacraments for two years in a row?

Despite the risk of COVID-19, Pope Francis has traveled to Iraq. "I am the pastor of people who are suffering," the Pope told Catholic News Service. "They will see that the pope is there in their country."

Surely, there is some double-masked eucharistic minister who could come by Elkton to administer the sacraments to lonely prisoners who are suffering?

In addition, many of the nonviolent inmates made written requests to the warden asking that they be released to compassionate home confinement. There are men here who use canes, walkers and wheelchairs; many others have serious chronic medical problems.

In April and May, a federal judge ordered the prison to identify medically vulnerable inmates and arrange to have them removed, either to another prison, on parole or home confinement — a move the U.S. Justice Department opposed. In June, the U.S. Supreme Court blocked that order.

More than 2 million people languish in U.S. jails and prisons, and the word "rehabilitation" is scantly mentioned. Prison is plain and simply punishment. The more than 1,000 men at Elkton are being warehoused at great economic and moral cost to our nations.

I certainly pray and hope that President Biden, a man known for his harsh penal policies in the Senate, will do something significant to replace this racist and cruel system of mass incarceration.

This is "American exceptionalism" at its worst.

[Patrick O'Neill is a longtime contributor to NCR. He is a cofounder of the Fr. Charlie Mulholland Catholic Worker House, which was opened in 1991 in Garner, North Carolina. In 2018, as part of the Kings Bay Plowshares 7, he entered Kings Bay Naval Base, the U.S. Atlantic home port of the Trident submarine, to protest these

submarines and the nuclear weapons that they carry.]

This story appears in the **Coronavirus: One year later** feature series. View the full series.

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