

## **Documentary tells story of prison church and St. Dismas**

*Documentary tells story of church 'behind bars'*

**By SUZANNE MOORE**

Features Editor

DANNEMORA -- Inmates built the Church of the Good Thief here, embracing the work all the more because this house of God would be dedicated to one of their own.

St. Dismas, said Michael Raab, "appeals to the prisoners because they know here's a really bad dude who at the end of his life reclaimed his soul."

That, he said, opens the door for Clinton Correctional Facility inmates to believe "maybe we can do that, too."

### **CHRIST'S SAINT**

St. Dismas was, by another unknown name, the thief and political insurgent crucified with Christ, who asked that he be remembered in paradise.

His feast day is celebrated on March 25.

Though Dismas was never canonized by the Roman Catholic Church, "he was the only saint canonized by Christ himself and the only one canonized while alive," says the Rev. Bill Edwards, facility chaplain, in the documentary "Church of the Good Thief" that Raab recently completed.

The nine-minute DVD tells the story of the structure, which was the first freestanding church built on the grounds of a prison in all the United States. It took Raab many months to finalize arrangements with the New York State Department of Correction before he could begin the project and then to get permission to show it. But that was nothing compared to the hurdles the Rev. Ambrose Hyland -- who came as chaplain to Dannemora in 1937 -- had to surmount before he could start construction.

The New York League for Separation of Church and State opposed the church's erection, but eventually the courts ruled otherwise, saying the U.S. Constitution provided for religious freedom.

Then Hyland, in his own words, "bummed and chiseled and begged" for the materials to build the church, many of which came secondhand from torn-down barns and other sources.

### **A MOBSTER'S GIFT**

Others were gifts of famous and even notorious donors, including the Appalachian red oak that was fashioned into pews, from Charles "Lucky" Luciano, a former inmate and so-called father of modern organized crime.

A descendant of Ferdinand Magellan gave two angel carvings rescued when the explorer's ship sank in the Philippines in the early 1500s.

"How they got to Dannemora from (the donor), I have no idea," Raab said.

An inmate named Carmelo Soraci incarcerated for forgery was taught the art of making stained glass and crafted the many windows in the church with fellow inmates as models.

Most every face, said Raab, belonged to an inmate.

And the face of St. Dismas in the statue that replicates the Good Thief's crucifixion shows true pain, said Raab.

As the story goes, the inmate who stood on an upturned bucket, arms bound to a cross, didn't show enough emotion for carver.

"(So) a prisoner kicked the bucket from under his feet, and he hung there," Raab said.

#### A GREAT STORY

The church, which serves various faiths, was dedicated on Aug. 28, 1941, and was made a National Historic Site a half-century later.

Raab first heard of St. Dismas many years ago, the day he met the family of his future wife, Dannemora native Barbara Beauchemin.

Her father, the late Arnold Beauchemin, just happened to mention the church within the prison walls and the thief for whom it was named.

"I filed it in the back of my head," Raab said. "It was a great story."

He and Barbara, now married for 27 years, live in North Carolina, where he is a magazine publisher. He has produced two other documentaries and entered "Church of the Good Thief" in various film festival competitions.

#### MESSAGE OF HOPE

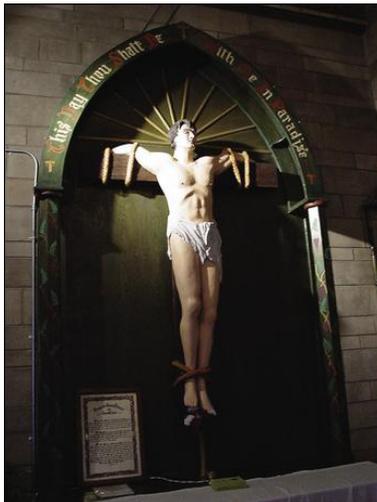
The documentary serves the purpose Raab intended: to tell a remarkable but little-known story of a prison church and a saint forgotten for centuries but with a strong message to share.

"St. Dismas has got no medals; he's got nobody behind him," he said. "All he's got is what he is, which is pretty cool."

And in Dannemora, where the chaplain sees inmates find peace at church services, the Good Thief does good work.

Just one example, perhaps, is the forger-turned-artisan Carmelo Soraci, who because of his stained-glass craftsmanship at Clinton and then for chapels at Sing Sing Correctional, was ordered released from prison on Feb. 10, 1962, with a new lease on life.

## Photos



This is St. Dismas in the alcove to the right upon entering the church.