

## Cardinal Dolan delivers message to Bedford inmates: 'God is with you'

**BEDFORD HILLS** — It would be hard to overstate the contrast between the drab Army-green prison wear of the women in the pews and the purple vestments of the exuberant Cardinal Timothy Dolan during his visit Wednesday to the Taconic Correctional Facility.

And yet the New York archbishop asked two dozen female prisoners seated in a small white chapel to overlook the fact he was there with about 50 members of the media.

Explaining that the coming days will bring Palm Sunday and Holy Week when Jesus was arrested, tried and executed between two criminals, Dolan reminded the inmates and prison staff attending a special Mass that one of Jesus' last acts on the cross was to promise paradise to a thief being crucified next to him who asked for mercy.

"Don't you ever say that you are in here by yourself," Dolan said, leaning over the lectern as a prisoner in the pew nodded her head. "God is with you. You know that, don't you? He is very close to you."

It was the height of a late morning homily at the medium-security prison for women that

marked the second time in three years that Dolan has celebrated a Mass in Bedford where "no one can leave early."

In 2009, less than a week after being named archbishop of New York, Dolan visited the women inmates at the maximum-security Bedford Hills Correctional Facility across the street, also with plenty of cameras and reporters.

"I love to visit you, but I also have to visit you because one day I will stand before Jesus and he will say, 'What did you do while you were archbishop — did you visit the prison in Bedford Hills?'" Dolan said.

"And I will say 'Yes I did. Check the film,'" Dolan added.

The laughter was as sonorous as any hymn.

Dolan's humor was second only to his pastoral charm as he greeted each inmate with a touch on the shoulder or a blessing before the Mass. Afterward, he waited at the back of the chapel to offer each woman

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a hug.

In one case, he told an inmate that she delivered the first reading at Mass so well that he wanted her to come to St. Patrick's Cathedral after she got out to read from the scriptures there as well.

"Oh my God that was the most amazing thing in the world to me," said the woman, Lisa Finkle, 47, of Rensselaer, N.Y., serving 25 years to life for murder. "He doesn't just preach doctrine — he brings it to a personal level so that you say, 'I can change my life.'"

Dolan made the same offer to read at St. Patrick's to another inmate who delivered Wednesday's first reading in Spanish.

Little did he know that she is getting out April 17.

"It was a great feeling," said the woman, Evelyn Reyes, 36, of Queens, who is in prison on a second-degree murder charge and just made parole two weeks ago. "It was a blessing to see him."

After being elevated to cardinal at the start of the year, Dolan is being spoken about more and more as a future pope.

"He is a prominent religious figure not just for Catholics but for all people of faith," said the Rev. Paul Tolve, the director of pastoral services at the Westchester County jail and one of the priests who celebrated Mass with Dolan. "In here they may not know all that he is doing nationally and in

the world, but they know he is good and loving and compassionate."

And he knows how to tell a joke.

Before he could give his blessing at the end of Mass they explained to Dolan that the women were going to give him a blessing.

Wearing a gold-trimmed miter, down went Dolan on both knees in front of the altar before them as they sang an Irish blessing with their hands raised.

After that, the Cardinal told them from his knees how special it made him feel.

"Now," he said. "Can someone help me up?"

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Cardinal Timothy Dolan greets women inmates after Mass at the Taconic Correctional Facility in Bedford Hills on Wednesday. / Carucha L. Meuse/ The Journal News

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