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Dolan Goes Behind Bars to Commune With Inmates



Nathaniel Brooks for The New York Times

Inmates in the chapel were "guys" and fellas" to Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan, laughing with him.

By JESSE MCKINLEY

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WALLKILL, N.Y. — Cardinal [Timothy M. Dolan](#) gazed at a group of well-behaved and truly captivated worshipers, flashed a big smile, and launched into a story about his recent participation in the papal conclave in Rome, where he helped elect Pope Francis.

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Nathaniel Brooks for The New York Times

The cardinal saying Mass at the maximum-security Shawangunk state prison in Wallkill, N.Y.

"I was locked in," said Cardinal Dolan, the Roman Catholic archbishop of New York. "So I feel kind of close to you."

He added one disclaimer: "I was locked in the Sistine Chapel, which is a lot nicer than here."

The congregation — some 60 inmates sitting in a bland cinder-block chapel — erupted in laughter, puncturing the otherwise stuffy prison air.

As Roman Catholics worldwide commemorate Holy Week, Cardinal Dolan chose Wednesday morning to visit the Shawangunk Correctional Facility, a maximum-security prison in the Hudson Valley town of Wallkill. The trip was

one day before [a scheduled visit by Pope Francis to a youth detention center in Rome](#), which the pope chose instead of the traditional visit to a basilica on the afternoon of Holy Thursday.

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Cardinal Dolan said that the new pope's actions had "inspired me" to become a better bishop. "We had hoped for a pope with the mind of Pope Benedict and the heart of Pope John Paul II," Cardinal Dolan said. "And we got one."

The [Vatican](#) described the pope's visit as a continuation of his practice, as a bishop in Argentina, of visiting prisons, hospitals or hospices for the "poor and marginalized." Likewise, Cardinal Dolan has long made a practice of visiting prisoners during Holy Week and Advent and at Thanksgiving, said Joseph Zwilling, a spokesman for the Archdiocese of New York.

"I love to say Mass in a prison," Cardinal Dolan said at Shawangunk. "Nobody ever comes late and nobody ever leaves early."

Such levity was welcomed by Joseph Cosentino, a gray-haired, bespectacled prisoner — and a Catholic — who was convicted of murder and said he came to Shawangunk in the mid-1990s. He called the cardinal's visit a "once in a lifetime" opportunity for a long-timer like himself.

"It's great: are you kidding me?" Mr. Cosentino said. "I would have loved for him to become pope."

It was Cardinal Dolan's first visit to Shawangunk, which houses more than 500 men behind rows of razor-wire fences and thick glass doors, and which is guarded by burly correctional officers, many of whom stood guard at either end of the prison chapel during the Mass. Several prisoners assisted with the Mass — which included a wine-free Communion.

But it was Cardinal Dolan's remarks that were obviously the draw, as the prelate dotted the usual liturgy with more informal remarks, calling the inmates "guys" and "fellas" and likening their hard time with that of Jesus.

"Jesus Christ was a prisoner," he said, mentioning his arrest before the Crucifixion. "Jesus Christ, God's only son, felt alone."

The cardinal was mostly smiles during the visit, hugging prisoners, asking about their hometowns and drawing a lot of laughs. At one moment, he pointed out an inmate seated in the back. "He was the luckiest guy," the cardinal said. "He said he couldn't hear the sermon."

But in a serious moment, he also described his trip as selfish, saying that he believed that, after he died, he would be able to answer in the affirmative if Jesus asked whether he had tended to the imprisoned.

"I'm going to be able to say, 'Yes, Jesus,'" he said. "'You ask the guys at Shawangunk.'"

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