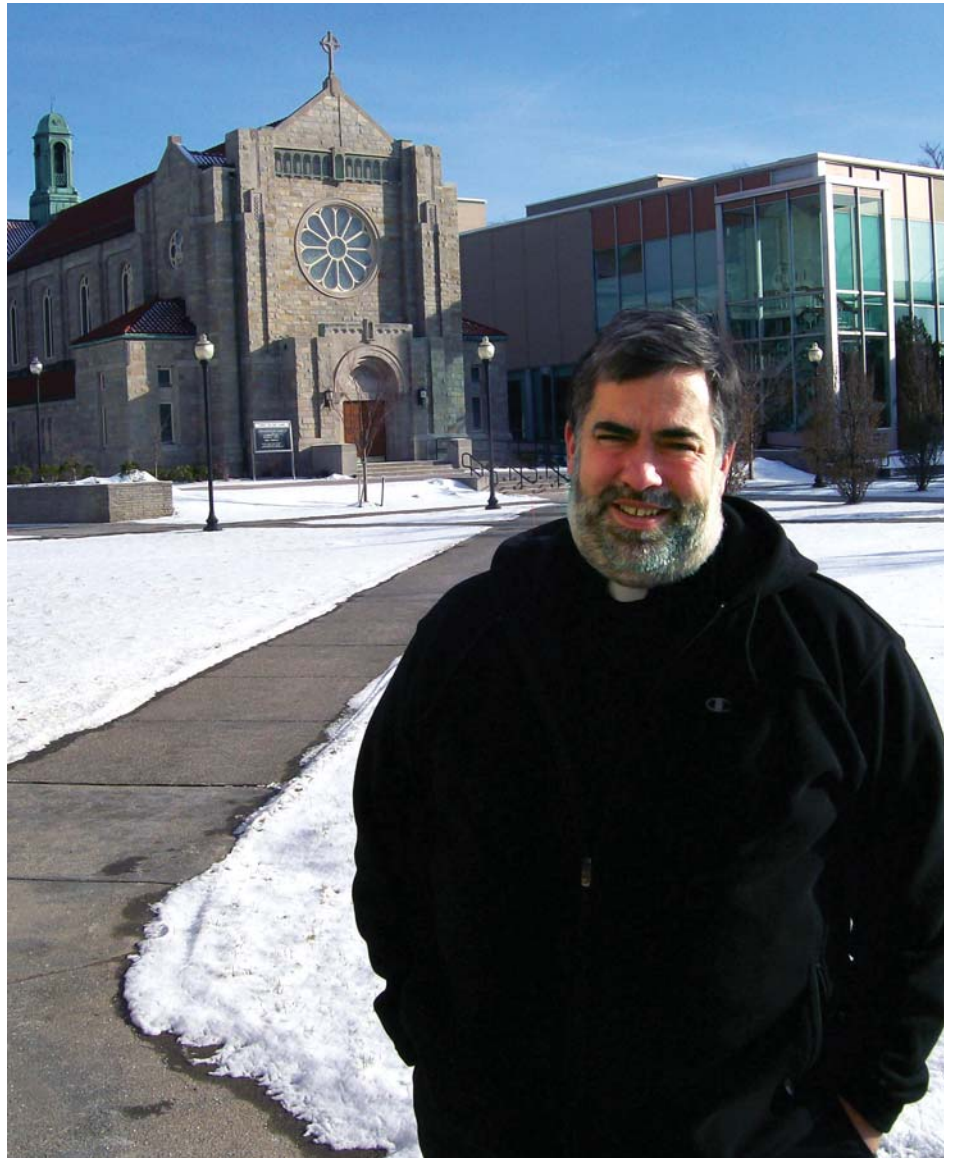


Christ in the Faces of the **Desperately Poor**



*Fr. John J. Mattimore, SJ,
began his ministry for a
simple, Jesuit reason:
He was asked.*

By Peter Feuerherd

While pundits and politicians pontificate about a heated social issue, Father John J. Mattimore, SJ, chaplain at the Buffalo Federal Detention Facility in Batavia, NY, sees immigration policy up close and personal. Batavia, amidst the rolling hills of Western New York, is where the federal government sends immigrants subject to deportation. Fr. Mattimore counsels and coordinates religious services for all detainees – Catholics, Protestants, Jews and Muslims.

On the job for the past three years, Fr. Mattimore, 50, works under a five-year contract between the federal government and Jesuit Refugee Service and Church World Service, a Protestant agency. He reflects that his work brings to mind Mother Teresa's injunction to see Christ in the faces of the desperately poor. He, however, posits an addendum: "Jesus is in the Christian poor. But he is also in the Muslim, the Jewish detainee or the men with no religion at all."

Fr. Mattimore notes that the detainees, most without family or familiar surroundings, can be hostile. Some are suspicious that he is a Catholic priest. Others resent that he works for the government. While he sees Jesus in them, he adds ruefully, "The disguise is quite good at times."

Detainees wear color-coded uniforms, much like hospital scrubs, indicating why they are being held. Blue is for those whose visas simply expired; orange, for those who have been charged with criminal behavior, and red, for those who have served time for criminal offenses. At the Batavia facility, the detainees are men from all parts of the world. They can wait months to see a judge, as the number of detainees continues to increase, straining the judicial system. Sometimes legal fights over deportations can last years.

One detainee was a young African man, a college student at the State University at Fredonia, who forgot his papers while on a bus to the Bronx to visit his parents. He

came and left in a day. Others are hardened criminals who have been in various prisons for years, and after they serve their time await deportation at Batavia. Most land somewhere in the middle. Almost all suffer from fear of deportation.

That fear is particularly true of detainees who have lived in the United States almost all their lives and have little connection to their homelands. "Some don't even have the language anymore (of their home countries)," notes Fr. Matti-

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more. Some seek asylum, such as the man from Guinea in Africa, a Catholic, who says he fears for his life in his homeland because Catholics are persecuted there.

Fr. Mattimore will listen sympathetically to such concerns from Catholics, but he emphasizes that his work is completely interfaith and ecumenical. He encourages detained imams to take care of the religious needs of Muslims. A local Protestant church brings members to minister to non-Catholic Christians. He has arranged for Jewish prisoners to take care of the religious needs of their fellows. "We're there for everyone," he notes. Much of his work consists of counseling and arranging for religious reading material for the more than 600 detainees.

Fr. Mattimore says he began this min-

istry for a simple, Jesuit reason: He was asked. A Buffalo native, he was working with the poor of inner-city Buffalo when he received the request to work with the detainees from Father Gerald J. Chojnacki, SJ, New York Provincial. He trained with the Federal Bureau of Prisons, but found the only way to prepare for the work was on-the-job. It took more than a year to establish the confidence of detainees and staff. "It was tough going at first," he says. "But the men are glad to have you to talk to." Detainees find themselves battling boredom, isolation and upstate New York winters. There is lots of television, but not much time for movement and exercise. Residents live in cramped quarters.

Fr. Mattimore's vocation grew out of the deep Jesuit roots in his hometown. His involvement in the Charismatic Renewal of the 1970s inspired his faith, and his Jesuit interest intensified while, as a teenager, he served as a receptionist at St. Michael's Church in downtown Buffalo, a Jesuit parish. There he observed Jesuit life up close and liked what he saw. "I got to know the old Jesuits who were legends," he says. Fr. Mattimore joined the Jesuits right out of high school, and proceeded to earn graduate degrees in education from Fordham University and Columbia Teachers College, training that he used as an English teacher at Xavier High School in Manhattan, assistant principal at Fordham Prep in the Bronx and as principal at Canisius High School.

His career later evolved into a new arena of direct service to the poor of Buffalo and as a cancer hospital chaplain. He dedicated his vocation to living out Matthew 25's list of the works of mercy. When he received the call to ministry with the detainees he reflected, "I was doing six of them. The one work of mercy I wasn't doing was visiting the imprisoned." That has changed over the past three years. Begun with some trepidation, he says, "I've come to see it as a privilege. No one else gets to visit with these men."