

OST IN SERVICE

BRISCOE UNIT GRADUATION

Photography by Mastik Media



Eleven inmates at the Texas Department of Criminal Justice's Dolph Briscoe Unit in Dilley graduated and earned Certificates of Pastoral Formation August 19 from Oblate School of Theology's Instituto de Formación Pastoral/Pastoral Formation Institute (IFP/PFI).

They are the second cohort to finish the two-year program, the only Catholic faith formation program in the Texas prison system. Receiving the certificate during a liturgy that also included baptism, reception into full communion and confirmation for some were Ronald Acon, Paul Aguilar, Adam Aguyo, Santos Armijo, Joe Cruz, Mark Garza, Joshua Mayes, Eduardo Navarette, Victor Emeka Nnabue, Mitchell Soliz and Benjamin Zibres. Dr. Scott Woodward, Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean, said nearly 30 inmates have graduated from the program and are certified to lead prayer and Bible studies and to assist in Catholic ministries, including the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA).

The real purpose of the program, Dr. Woodward said, is to prepare the inmates for re-entry into society. Each candidate must be within five years of release to apply for the program. "This is an effort to give them tools to work with when they get out and join a community. Inside the prison, they function as if this were their own parish," he explained. "It's a way

of strengthening the community inside the prison and giving the men a sense of self-worth when they come out. After commencement, they'll come up for a picture, and the first question they ask is, 'Can I hold my certificate?' It's the first thing they've ever finished. It's a really big deal for these guys," he explained.

Dr. Woodward said OST officials see this program as a way of continuing the mission of St. Eugene de Mazenod, the founder of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. "His first mission was to prisoners, and few people are more abandoned than prisoners. We're continuing the work he started by working with these people inside the Texas prison system," he emphasized. "It's the most Oblate thing we do at OST. There is nothing more Oblate than going into prisons to work with these men in white," he commented. Deacon Harry Flavin, director of OST's ministry program at the Briscoe Unit, called the IFP/PFI program "incredible," noting, "The change in the guys through this program is very real. When they know that you care and you're there for them, it builds an incredible bond."

He recalled that the first time he introduced the program to a group of inmates, they asked why he was there. "I had an inspiration from the Holy Spirit and said, 'We're here because you're made in the image and likeness of God; God loves you, and we love you.' They really sat up in their chairs. They love the program and wish they could have it five days a week instead of one," Deacon Flavin said.

Bishop Michael Pfeifer, OMI, Bishop Emeritus of San Angelo, who presided at the liturgy, said he baptized four inmates, received three others into full communion with the Catholic Church and confirmed 16 during the liturgy. "It's marvelous," he commented, adding, "I had 50 prisons in the Diocese of San Angelo. I wish I'd had something like this there. Many inmates have good qualities; they've struggled with faith but are willing to make a new start in their lives. In this program, they become missionary disciples to others within the (prison) institution, helping them rediscover their faith and a relationship with Christ, our Blessed Mother and the Church."