News
Ministry



Sr. Mary Brendan Ezigbo works at the Enugu Custodial Center in southeastern Nigeria, where she attends to the spiritual needs of inmates. (Ekpali Saint)



by Ekpali Saint

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When Sr. Mary Brendan Ezigbo's congregation, the Daughters of Divine Love, asked her to coordinate the catechetical commission for her congregation in February 2023, she was excited and nervous, particularly because the new role included teaching catechism to inmates who are interested in learning more about the Catholic faith.

"Catechesis is in fulfillment of my own vocation. It is a call I received from God to reach out to these poor souls [inmates]," she told Global Sisters Report. "These people are children of God. I am convinced that I am called to work among the least of Jesus' brothers."

One inmate who has been at the Enugu Custodial Center for 13 years said he began his catechism class in May 2024. Seven months later, he received the sacrament of confirmation. Though he was born into a Catholic home, the 39-year-old said he never had the opportunity to join catechism classes before his incarceration.

He added that the catechism classes taught by Ezigbo helped him focus on his spiritual growth, which ultimately led to his appointment as the catechist of the custodial center in July 2025. He believed that the catechism class and the sacrament he received adequately prepared him for his role as a catechist. Now, he assists by coordinating a catechism class of 20 inmates at the center.

"Being a catechist is helping me to grow spiritually. And it makes me feel good," he told GSR. "I am what I am today through the help of Sister Brendan."

A 52-year-old inmate, who like the inmate catechist wished to remain anonymous, received the sacrament of confirmation at the custodial center in 2025. "It is the best gift anyone here can receive," he said. "When you are outside, you have a lot of things in your mind, but being here makes me closer to God."

> 'I am closer to God now than when I was outside. Now that I have embraced the life of prayer, I don't think I will leave that behind even when I leave here.'
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Ezigbo said she is encouraged by the impact so far. In 2023 alone, the year she began teaching catechism at the center, 16 inmates were confirmed. The following year, 12 inmates received the sacrament of Baptism and first Communion, and 10 more were confirmed. Ezigbo then introduced a devotion to St. Jude Thaddeus and monthly adoration, where she invites a priest to expose the Blessed Sacrament for inmates and lead them closer to Christ.

"I do that so there will be a continuous spiritual journey," the nun told GSR. "This also makes the inmates happy."

Evolving mission

When Ezigbo started her prison apostolate, her focus was on teaching inmates in Nigerian correctional centers the catechism and preparing them for Baptism, first communion and confirmation. This mission quickly evolved when she noticed and began addressing some of the challenges inmates face while serving their terms.

Ezigbo said that families often abandon inmates because "they believe inmates have brought shame to them." In situations like this, she visits families to reconcile them with inmates at the custodial center.

"Some of them, their parents don't know their whereabouts; they don't know they are in prison. When the inmates tell me, I try to contact the families; either I visit the family myself or I send someone if the place is far from me. If the inmates have their contacts, I call to unite them again. I continue to talk to them to reconcile both parties. It has worked for some," she explained.

For nursing mothers at the custodial center in Enugu, she often provides them with diapers for their babies.

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Also, considering that rehabilitation and reintegration support programs are sometimes not available in Nigerian correctional centers, which could make social adaptation a challenge for inmates and even make them vulnerable to reconviction, Ezigbo connects those who have completed their terms with rehabilitation centers to receive livelihood training.

Ezigbo said that some inmates have health problems and express their discontent with her. The Nigeria 2023 Human Rights Report found that overcrowding, inadequate sewage facilities, a shortage of medical supplies and limited medical personnel further worsened the health situation of inmates in the West African nation. According to the report, these challenges can lead to increased disease in correctional facilities.

At the Enugu Custodial Center, the Carmelite Prisoners' Interest Organization, a Catholic nonprofit committed to improving the welfare of inmates in Nigeria, occasionally visits the inmates to provide free medical treatment. To reach more inmates during the organization's medical outreach, however, Ezigbo said she involved Catholic doctors in the Enugu Diocese to join these efforts at the custodial center. Additionally, Ezigbo said she has also invited a Catholic hospital in Enugu to provide free eye treatment to about 200 inmates.

Ezigbo admits that inadequate financial resources sometimes limit her work, and she is unable to meet other basic needs of inmates. Since 2023, she has relied on the generosity of private individuals, who have helped her purchase catechism books and other materials to help inmates stay committed to their devotion and classes.

The 52-year-old inmate shared with GSR that he is now a member of the Sacred Heart of Jesus society and an altar server.

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