

Using art to cope in prison

Astrid de Gooijer, a 60-year-old Dutch national imprisoned in Ecuador, recently won an international art competition for prisoners entitled "Discover the Face of Life." This contest, arranged by the International Commission for Catholic Prison Pastoral Care, received more than 1,500 entries from 49 countries.



Imprisoned on a drug charge for the past two years and still awaiting her trial, Astrid says that life in jail "is like hell" because there is nothing to do but wait. She started painting simply to pass time, without knowing about her talent. In fact, she was hesitant to enter her painting into the competition, but fellow inmates managed to persuade her. She still finds it hard to believe that she actually won.

"I started crying immediately when they told me the news," she says in her diary, excerpts of which were on display along with the winning picture. "Can you imagine that I am number one in the whole world? It's like a dream!"

The prison where Astrid is incarcerated is home to 320 female inmates. However, there is also a much larger men's facility with 4,000 inmates next door, and they all live in difficult conditions. Both jails are overcrowded, which leads to riots, infectious diseases and even occasional hunger strikes.

Unfortunately, inmates have little opportunity to undertake rehabilitation or training while incarcerated as the Government has no capacity to offer these services. However, some volunteers, such as the chaplain Agustín Alcázar, help make inmates' lives a little brighter.

"What I do most is evangelization," he says via e-mail. "But also, every 15 days I bring a doctor and two nurses to check up on the sick inmates, although sometimes there are no resources available to buy medicines for them."

Under these harsh conditions, art can serve as a coping mechanism where prisoners can express their often frustrated emotions in a constructive way. In fact, the women's prison has an informal painting school, which is where Astrid regularly paints, alongside inmates who share this interest.

"Painting is very therapeutic for me," she says, "and I enjoy it very much!"

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