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POPE VISITS ROME JAIL

Pope John XXIII carried the spirit of Christmas and human kindness into the bleak cells of Rome's biggest prison Friday 26 December during an unprecedented visit that brought cheers and tears from hardened criminals.

And there were prison guards too who were not dry-eyed.

"We must carry out all the deeds of mercy" Pope John said, his own voice betraying emotion at the sight of hundreds of hands clasping the bars of cells surrounding a makeshift altar.

The Pope spent one hour and 10 minutes with the 1,300 male prisoners of the Regina Coeli (Queen of Heaven) prison on the banks of the Tiber River.

From the "rotunda" the central circular area from where he could look around and up and see three tiers of cells and down corridors leading to others, the Pope spoke and gave his blessing.

Later, when the Pontiff strolled through the galleries, stopping and comforting first one ~~widow~~ then another prisoner, an old detainee humbly asked if his message of hope were also for him. The prisoner said he had made many mistakes.

Pope John said nothing, but leaned over and dried a tear on the old man's face. Then he clasped him to his chest where the man wept. "I have looked into your eyes with my eyes" the Pontiff ~~went~~ had told the prisoners "I have put my heart near your heart".

The Pontiff was greeted at his entrance to the prison and at his departure by the silvery blast of a trumpet - just as his entrance to St. Peter's Basilica is marked by a triple sounding of the instrument. The prisoners shouted "Viva il Papa".