

Prison Conditions

“For I was in prison and you visited me.” Matthew 25:16

This is the fifth in a series of six pastoral statements by Catholic Bishops of the South on the Criminal Justice process and a gospel response.

“A Catholic approach to crime begins with the recognition that the dignity of the human person applies to both victim and offender. We believe the current trend of more and more people in prisons, with little education and drug treatment, does not reflect Christian values and will not make our communities safer.”

U.S. Catholic Bishops statement “Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice, November 2000 [1]

As pastoral leaders of the Roman Catholic community, we continue to reflect with you on the themes of responsibility, rehabilitation, and restoration in light of the reality of crime and criminal justice in our area of the country.

The fundamental starting point for all Catholic social teaching is the defense of human life and dignity. The most wounded victim and the most callous criminal retain their humanity. Both are created in the image of God and possess a dignity, worth, and value that must be recognized, safeguarded, defended, and promoted.

Therefore while recognizing that people who harm others must be held accountable for the hurt they have caused, we cannot give up on those who have made mistakes and violated laws. [2] We must recognize the human dignity of all prisoners and remember that Jesus, himself, was a prisoner. [3]

Crime and correction are at the intersection of rights and responsibilities. Those who commit crimes violate the rights of others and disregard their responsibilities. The test for the rest of us is how we exercise our responsibility to hold offenders accountable without violating their basic rights. [4] Any system of penal justice must provide people who are incarcerated with the necessities to live in dignity, i.e. food, clothing, shelter, personal safety, timely medical care, education, and meaningful work. [5]

Ultimately prison should be about justice not vengeance. Punishment must have the clear purpose of protecting society and rehabilitating those who violate the law. This calls for a focus on rehabilitation and restoration. [6] What policy implications does this focus have?

- We must stop the practice of putting so many people in prison. There are more than 2 million people in jail or prison in the United States. [7] Our imprisonment rate is the highest in the world—6 to 12 times higher than rates in other Western countries. [8] The United States now spends more than \$50 billion dollars per year on jails and prisons. [9]

We call on all people of good will to stop building more and more prisons. Instead, we should redirect those resources to crime prevention, rehabilitation of prisoners, education, substance abuse, and programs of probation, parole, and reintegration. [10]

- We call on our leaders to reject simplistic solutions to crime, such as “three strikes and you’re out” and other types of rigid mandatory sentencing. These approaches increase the imprisonment rate and keep people in jail longer than may necessary. [11] Alternatives to incarceration, especially for non-violent offenders be should be emphasized. [12]

- Because faith has a transforming effect on all of our lives, genuine religious participation contributes to rehabilitation and renewal. Therefore, all jails, prisons, or detention facilities should have a regular and ongoing Catholic ministry. Ministers and parish volunteers should have expanded access to prisoners through chaplaincy programs. [13]

- Prisoners are entitled to be safe while they are incarcerated. No prisoner should be subjected to gang violence or abuse by other inmates or correctional officers. [14]

- Racism and discrimination in the criminal justice system must be halted. [15] Black men born in 2001 have a 1 in 3 chance of being imprisoned during their lifetimes. Latino men have a 1 in 6 chance; white men have a 1 in 7 chance. [16]

- Drug treatment is a cost-effective way to reduce both substance abuse and crime, given that at the time of arrest 2 out of 3 adults and 50% of juveniles test positive for at least one non-alcoholic drug. All prisoners deserve the opportunity to participate in substance abuse programs. These programs need to be available in the language of the prisoners. Providing drug treatment will save more than it will cost in the long run. [17]

- There must be a dramatic increase in the treatment for mental illness. Human rights groups estimate that one of every five persons in prison is mentally ill. [18] While society must protect the community from those whose mental illness causes them to become aggressive or violent, society also has an obligation to insure that offenders receive proper treatment for their illnesses. Mental illness is often undiagnosed; many in our prison system would do better in settings more equipped to handle their mental health needs. [19]

- The families of prisoners also need the help of a loving community. The gospel calls us to minister to families of those imprisoned and especially to children who lose a parent to incarceration. We must help families connect with members in prisons and prepare families for the steps that need to be taken so that prisons can reintegrate into society. Prison policies should encourage and support visits by relatives. Our parishes can help provide transportation for family visits, offer material assistance when income is lost, and provide counseling to families. [20]

- Prisoner’s work must be worthwhile and compatible with human dignity. We call for national standards to be adopted and enforced regarding pay for prisoners. Enabling

prisoners to work for a fair wage may, among other things, help keep their families off welfare, either totally or partially. [21] All of us must work to improve the jails and prisons in our communities. We can visit prisoners and visit the correctional institution itself. [22] We can support prison chaplains in their work, educate ourselves about the rights of prisoners and the conditions governmental authorities and elected officials. [23]

We ask all people of good will to join us in a thorough re-examination of the criminal justice system. When we respond to crime, we must do so in a way that respects the human dignity of all, whether they are victims of crime or offenders. We call upon all people of faith to pray, study, and act in order to transform what is unjust about our criminal justice system. Only when our criminal justice system reflects the love of Jesus Christ will our communities be truly safe.

1 Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice, Statement of the Catholic Bishops of the United States, November 15, 2000 (hereafter RRR), section on Scriptural Foundations.

2 RRR, Scriptural, Theological and Sacramental Heritage.

3 RRR, Scriptural Foundations.

4 RRR, Catholic Social Teaching, Human Rights and Responsibilities.

5 RRR, Human Life and Dignity.

6 RRR, Scriptural, Theological and Sacramental Heritage.

7 The Sentencing Project reports that as of mid-2003 there were 2.1 million people in jails and prisons - a continual rise in putting people in prison for the last 31 years. Full report at www.sentencingproject.org/pdfs/1044.pdf

8 RRR, Punishment in US.

9 American Bar Association Report. See Henry Weinstein, "US Justice System is Broken," Lawyers Say," Los Angeles Times, June 24, 2004.

10 RRR, Policy Foundations and Directions, Number 7.

11 RRR, Policy Foundations and Directions, Number 7.

12 RRR, Policy Foundations and Directions, Number 7.

13 RRR, Church Mission, Number 3; Policy and Directions Number 8; also RRR, The Church's Mission, Number 3.

14 RRR, Scriptural, Theological and Sacramental Heritage; and RRR, Human Life and Dignity.

15 RRR, Characteristics of the Inmate Population; "Brothers and Sisters to Us," U.S. Catholic Bishops Pastoral Letter on Racism, 1979.

16 American Bar Association Report. See Henry Weinstein, "US Justice System is Broken," Lawyers Say," Los Angeles Times, June 24, 2004.

17 RRR, Policy Foundations and Directions, Numbers 7 and 9; and RRR, Offenders and Treatment.

18 Human Rights Watch, "Ill-Equipped: U.S. Prisons and Offenders with Mental Illness."

19 RRR, Policy Foundations and Directions, Number 9.

20 RRR, Church's Mission, Number 3; RRR, Family, Community Participation; RRR, Reach Out to Offenders and Their Families; The Reform of Correctional Institutions in the 1970s (hereafter RCI), a statement of the US Catholic Conference, November 1973, Suggested Action Steps and Recommendation 14.

21 "The Reform of Correctional Institutions in the 1970s," United States Catholic Conference, November 1973, recommendation 10.

22 RCI, Concerns.

23 The Reform of Correctional Institutions in the 1970s (hereafter RCI), a statement of the US Catholic Conference, November 1973, Suggested Action Steps.