

Call for Action

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

“The challenge of curbing crime and reshaping the criminal justice system is not just a matter of public policy, but is also a test of Catholic commitment. In the face of so much violence and crime, our faith calls our church to responsibility and action. A wide variety of Catholic communities have responded with impressive programs of service and advocacy.....yet more is needed.” U.S. Catholic Bishops statement, “Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice,” November 2000.

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.

In preparation for this pastoral statement, we asked the Glenmary Research Center to conduct a nationwide survey on criminal justice/prison ministry. The response was most heartening. We received 220 responses from diocesan offices, eparchies and ecumenical prison ministries. We were edified by the dedication and creativity of those involved in this ministry. At the same time, we acknowledge the challenges, both to our dioceses and to our local parishes.

Our Catholic belief in the inherent dignity of every human person, even a convicted felon, compels us to declare that virtually no non-violent offender should be incarcerated. The Catholic principle of promoting the “common good” also suggests that public funds can be more effectively spent on rehabilitation programs, rather than penal facilities. In the event that incarceration has occurred, we urge dioceses to encourage parishes to engage in restorative assistance to prisoners who have completed their sentences, helping them make the difficult transition from cell to community.

Social Transformation: In West Virginia, an ecumenical team with lengthy experience in the corrections system pioneered an effort to implement restorative justice. Instead of building costly new prisons, a pilot project was initiated in three counties. This project highlighted community based corrections that incorporates day-report centers, pre-trial home confinement, and community service for moderate to low-risk offenders who are sentenced by treatment courts. This reserves expensive prison cells for violent offenders. The program is now being applied statewide. It is saving millions of dollars for the state and county governments while at the same time saving lives by providing effective treatment for offenders.¹

Diocesan Resource: The importance of having a diocesan coordinator for criminal justice/prison ministry was mentioned again and again. In most dioceses, the prison population is often in isolated rural areas. Even though the incarcerated are members of the local parish, a parish response is always a challenge. In light of limited staff and resources, such a diocesan coordinator can serve as an inspiration and encouragement to efforts at the parish level, e.g. developing parish teams.²

Education: In Louisiana, there is an ongoing effort to raise awareness of prison issues. Activities include parish homilies, meetings with community groups, and stories in the media.³ Bulletin inserts are being made available to requesting parishes in Wisconsin.⁴ In Kansas, ex-prisoners share their experience from the pulpit with local congregations.⁵

Parish Response: In Missouri, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul has organized a host of service opportunities in local parishes. These endeavors include bringing Communion and other pastoral services to inmates, offering Kairos retreats, volunteering as tutors, participating in one-on-one visits, and organizing pen pals. Upon an inmate's release, she or he is provided with clothing, bus tickets, medical help and "release to rent" (providing housing to those with no family).⁶

Re-entry into local community: "Re-entry is one of the most important times in a man or woman's life after leaving prison. Often they leave with only the prison clothes on their back."⁷ Diocese after diocese reported fledgling programs for re-entry, but the response is acknowledged as far too limited. We issue a challenge to each parish, or cluster of parishes, to sponsor an inmate returning to the local community. This would include establishing a relationship with the inmate at least months prior to release, accompanying the inmate through the gates upon release, and mentoring the person, not only for the first months during re-entry into the local community, but on an ongoing basis.

Comprehensive Plan of Action: The Texas Catholic Conference, encompassing 15 dioceses, is developing a comprehensive action plan that could serve as a model for the region.⁸

Ecumenical Collaboration: Respondents concur that ecumenical collaboration is essential, especially when the focus is on education, vocational training, and re-entry into the community. This requires proper evaluation at the parish level. We highlight these programs: Prison Fellowship (PF) partners with local churches across the country to minister to a group that society often scorns and neglects: prisoners, ex-prisoners, and their families.⁹ Transition of Prisoner (TOP) is recognized as a best practice program for serving recently released ex-prisoners. After ten years in existence, no ex-prisoner having gone through the TOP program has been sent back to prison for the commission of a new offense.¹⁰ Restorative Justice Ministries Network (RJMN)¹¹ provides email messages to the community the very day the prisoner is scheduled to return home to enable the parish to welcome the prisoner.¹² Citizens United for Rehabilitation of Errants (CURE) provides support for prisoners and family members, and works to reform the system.¹³ Finally, Kairos Prison Ministry¹⁴ offers cursillo retreats for prisoners.

As we and our brother bishops stated in *Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration*, "We hope these reflections will encourage those who are already working for reform, both inside and outside the system. We also hope many others will join with them in efforts to prevent crime, reach out to victims, offer ministry and rehabilitation in our prisons, help to re-integrate ex-offenders, and advocate for new approaches."

¹ Glenmary survey, #0211.

² Ibid., #0096.

³ Ibid., #0210.

⁴ Ibid., #0094.

⁵ Ibid., #0107.

⁶ Ibid., #0094.

⁷ Ibid., #0095.

⁸ <http://www.txcatholic.org>

⁹ <http://www.pfm.org>

¹⁰ <http://www.topinc.net/pr01.htm>

¹¹ <http://prisonministry.net/rjmn>

¹² Glenmary survey, #0068.

¹³ <http://www.curenational.org/new>

¹⁴ <http://www.kairosprisonministry.org>

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