



## **Opportunities for Prisoners to Reform and Reintegrate<sup>1</sup>** **Pope Francis**

### **We are Going to be Judged on this**

Dear Brothers and Sisters, I greet you all warmly, who are taking part in the meeting on Integral Human Development and the Catholic Penitentiary Pastoral. When I commended the Dicastery for the Service of Integral Human Development to make patent the Church's concern for persons in particular situations of suffering, I wanted the reality to be kept in mind of so many imprisoned brothers and sisters. However, it isn't a task pointed out only for the Dicastery, but for the whole Church in fidelity to the mission received from Christ, which is called to act permanently God's mercy in favor of the most vulnerable and homeless in whom Jesus himself is present (Cf. Matthew 25:40). We are going to be judged on this. As I have already pointed out at other times, the situation of prisons continues to be a reflection of our social reality and, consequently, of our egoism and indifference, synthesized in a throwaway culture (Cf. Address during the Visit to the Social Readaptation Center of Ciudad Juarez, February 17, 2016).

### **Integral Human Development**

Often society - through legalistic and inhuman decisions, justified in an alleged quest for the good and for security -, seeks with the isolation and imprisonment of those that act against the social norms, the ultimate solution to the problems of community

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<sup>1</sup> Message delivered on 8 November 2019 to the participants in the international conference of prison chaplains on the theme, "Integral Human Development and Catholic Prison Pastoral Care" organized by the Vatican's Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development.

life. Justified thus is that great quantities of public resources are allocated to repress the offenders instead of truly seeking the promotion of an integral development of persons, which will reduce the circumstances that foster the carrying out of illicit actions. It is easier to repress than to educate and, I would say, it's more convenient also. To deny the injustice present in society and to create these areas to lock the offenders in oblivion is easier than to offer equality of opportunities of development for all citizens. It's a way of discarding, of "polite discarding," in quotation marks. Moreover, not infrequently, places of detention fail in the objective to promote processes of reinsertion, without a doubt because they lack sufficient resources that make it possible to respond to social, psychological and family problems experienced by detained persons, as well as frequent over-population in prisons, which turn them into true places of de-personalization.

### **Reintegration**

Instead, a true social re-insertion begins by guaranteeing opportunities for development, education, worthy jobs, access to health care, as well as generating public areas of citizen participation. Today, in a special way, our societies are called to overcome the stigmatization of those that have committed an error, as instead of offering help and adequate resources to live a worthy life, we have accustomed ourselves to discard more than to consider the efforts the person makes to correspond to God's love in his life. Many times, when leaving prison, the person finds himself in a world that is foreign to him and that in addition does not see him as worthy of trust, including going as far as to exclude him from the possibility to work to have proper sustenance. On impeding persons to recover fully the exercise of their dignity, they are exposed again to the dangers that accompany the lack of opportunity to develop, in the midst of violence and insecurity. As Christian communities, we must ask ourselves a question. If these brothers and sisters have already paid for the evil committed, why is a new social punishment put on their shoulders by rejection and indifference? On many occasions, this social aversion is one more reason to expose them to relapse in their faults.

### **Window and Horizon**

Brethren, in this meeting, you have already shared some of the numerous initiatives with which the local Churches accompany pastorally the detained, those that end their detention and the families of many of them. With God's inspiration, each ecclesial community is assuming its own path to make the Father's mercy present to all these brothers that make a permanent call resound so that every man and every society will seek to act firmly and decisively in favor of peace and justice. We have the certainty that the works that Divine Mercy inspires in each one of you and in the numerous

members of the Church dedicated to this service are truly effective. May the love of God that sustains and encourages you in the service of the weakest, strengthen and enhance this ministry of hope that you do every day among the imprisoned. I pray for each person that in generous silence serves these brothers, recognizing the Lord in them. I congratulate you for all the initiatives with which, not without difficulties, the families of the detainees are also assisted pastorally and are accompanied in this period of great trial, so that the Lord may bless all. I would like to end with two images, two images that might help. One cannot speak of a debt adjustment with society in a windowless prison. There is no human punishment without a horizon and see to it that in your countries the prisons, the jails always have windows and a horizon, including a life sentence, which for me is disputable, a life sentence should also have a horizon. The second image is an image that I saw several times when I went on the bus in Buenos Aires to a parish of the Villa Devoto area and passed by the Devoto Prison: the line of people going to visit the detained, especially the image of the mothers, the mothers of the detained that everybody saw, because they were in the queue one hour before entering and who then were subjected to security searches, often humiliating. Those women weren't ashamed if the whole world saw them. Their son was there and they showed their face for their son. May the Church learn the maternity of these women and learn the gestures of maternity that we must have with these brothers and sisters that are detained. Windows and mothers while queuing are the two images I leave with you. With the witness and service you give, you keep alive your fidelity to Jesus Christ. At the end of our life, may we be able to hear Christ's voice that calls us, saying: "Come, blessed of my Father, receive the inheritance of the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, because what you did for one of these my littlest brothers, you did to Me" (Matthew 25:34.40). May Our Lady of Mercy accompany you, your families, and everyone that serves the imprisoned. And, please, don't forget to pray for me. Thank you.