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I have always had a certain sympathy for men and women in prison. This is not because I condone their crimes but when talking to them I realise there are so many aspects to their present condition. I also remember the Lord's wonderful words about the last judgement in Matthew's Gospel: *Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty, a stranger or naked, sick or in prison, and did not come to your help? (Mt. 25:45)*. Somehow, prisoners are very dear to the Lord's heart and the way we minister to them is of enormous importance.

The teaching of the second Vatican Council says that, *Without exception, we are to recognise the innate dignity of every human being as somebody made in the image and likeness of God.* This, of course, includes the 87,000 people held in the prisons of England and Wales, today.

In his letter *for the jubilee in Prisons* on the occasion of the Holy Year 2000, Pope John Paul II said:

Those in prison look back with regret or remorse to the days when they were free and they experience their time now as a burden which never seems to pass. In this difficult situation, a strong experience of faith can greatly help in finding the inner balance which every human being needs.

What does this Faith say about prisoners? Pope Benedict XVI visited Rebibbia prison in Rome, recently and said this to the prisoners:

We come simply to tell you that God loves you. Wherever there is a hungry person, a foreigner, a sick person or a prisoner, there is Christ himself who is awaiting our visit and our help.

Some eight years ago, the Catholic Bishops' Conference published a Report on Criminal Justice matters, called *A Place of Redemption*. We launched it in Brixton prison. Although the statistics have changed, it is still a very important document, containing a Christian view on Punishment and Prison. I recommend anyone involved in our Criminal Justice process, to read this Report. It doesn't make comfortable reading though, because it challenges us all to pray, to reflect and to be somehow involved in the world of Crime, Punishment, Justice and Mercy. The heart of the document is based on Catholic Social Teaching and the concept of The Common Good. Every individual is created in the image of God. Every human person is the clearest reflection of God that we have. As the 1996 document on *The Common Good* puts it:

We believe each person possesses a basic dignity that comes from God, not from any human quality or accomplishment, not from race or gender, age or economic status.

Then the document spells out how we should view our prison system:

*The test therefore of every institution or policy is whether it enhances or threatens human dignity and indeed human life itself.....This insight has a number of ramifications. It is important to remember that it applies as much to victims as to the prisoner. It also bears upon our responsibilities as well as our rights: the *Imago Dei* the *Image of God* constitutes the basis of obligations to others . for we all carry the obligation to see God in all others,*

irrespective of wealth, power, prestige, utility or that a new possibility for being human resides in that

This must also mean that a penal policy which is essentially or primarily punitive is also unacceptable for it does not fully respect that the human person remains always open to the possibility of mercy as the necessary complement to justice and to the fulfilment of social relations.

Is our prison system primarily punitive? Deprivation of liberty is punishment itself and surely is only appropriate for adults who have committed very serious or violent crimes. However, for those in prison, this time must be well spent with opportunities for rehabilitation. The then Home Secretary, Winston Churchill, in 1910 said that the treatment of crime and criminals is one of the most unflinching tests of the civilisation of any Country.

Let's look at a few statistics which might help us to discover how punitive is our own Criminal Justice system:

39% of children in custody have been on the child protection register or have experienced neglect or abuse. 71% have been involved with, or in the care of Social Services prior to imprisonment.

Over half the women in prison have suffered domestic violence; over 30% have been sexually abused.

50% of the men and women in prison ran away from home as children.

Shouldn't we try to better understand why people commit crime? I suspect that better understanding would lead to less punishment and a clearer connection between Criminal Justice and Social policy.

Our politicians use hard words in describing our approach to justice, the media tend to also do the same. The Prison Service is now asked to reduce its budget by 23%.

In 2004, when we launched *A Place of Redemption* the prison population stood at about 75,000. In the last 8 years it has increased by about 12,000. In the last two decades, it has doubled! This is not because of significantly more crime but because we have become more punitive. increasing the length of sentences, introducing mandatory sentences and seeking imprisonment earlier for those who in the past would have received a fine or told to do Community Service.

Over 80 of our prisons are overcrowded. There is a great deal of violence and self-harm in our prisons with around 80% suffering some form of mental illness. Only 36% of released former Offenders go into Education, Training or Employment and many are homeless and in debt, on leaving prison. 47% of all adults are reconvicted within one year, rising to 57% for those serving sentences of less than 12 months and almost 70% for those under 18 years of age.

On the positive side, there is a 45% drop in the number of children and young people being sent to custody in the Youth Justice system, with a 1000 fewer young people in custody today than 10 years ago. Community Sentences are reducing reoffending rates better than custodial sentences. Nonetheless, the Government's 46 page consultation document, uses the word 'punitive' 42 times and refers to 'punishment' on 48 occasions. We need to restore an emphasis on Rehabilitation and Reform, rather than punishment.

all this? We live in a society where most people do not
e of Faith, too, are indeed influenced by this attitude.
istory of being alongside those in prison. Today, for
example, we have a record number of Catholic Prison chaplains, working in the prisons of
England and Wales - 180 Priests, Deacons, Religious and Lay-people. They work
alongside other chaplains and in partnership with the Prison Service. Our presence isn't just
motivated by our social concern but by the values of the Gospel. There is a Gospel
imperative which demands our attention. %awas in prison and you visited me,+or you didn't!
That is what the Lord will say to us on Judgement Day!

Sometimes, good things happen in prison. Sometimes prisoners take the few opportunities
that exist, to address the issues behind their offending behaviour and are able to move
forward positively in their lives. Many people in prison, in their pain and sense of failure
open their hearts to God, like never before, and discover the God of tenderness and
compassion, who is slow to anger and rich in mercy.

I would like to draw your attention to another area on which rehabilitation and reform
depend, that is the support that people leaving prison, really need. All the statistics available
indicate that people leaving prison, who receive support and encouragement from others, on
the outside, are much more likely to break the cycle of re-offending. Without anyone to care,
former Offenders tend to drift back to old neighbourhoods and to old patterns of behaviour.
Jobs, Training and Housing are vitally important pathways that lead to Change. But even
more crucial is the actual presence of another living human being alongside, who
understands the struggle, who refuses to condemn and recognises the innate value and
worth of the Child of God who has just left prison.

There are many excellent schemes that offer that necessary support which is needed by our
brothers and sisters on discharge from prison. Sometimes, sadly, Christian People of Faith
have been slow to be involved in such schemes, even though the words of the Lord are so
clear. We all need to examine our consciences.

May I commend to you especially, Basic Caring Communities which is an initiative of
PACT. Basic Caring Communities asks for volunteers from among Christian Churches and
provides initial and on-going training and supervision for volunteers who accompany former
Offenders for the first few crucial months following release from prison. A small group of four
volunteers forms around a core member, offering daily contact, if so wished. Then, once a
week, the whole little group come together, over a cup of tea and a piece of cake to enjoy
each others company and to talk about the ups and downs of life. This can actually be the
first time ever that someone leaving prison has experienced a real sense of belonging, of
being heard, of being valued and supported. This experience of being treated with respect
and kindness is not mere sympathy. It is not a soft way of treating people who have
committed crime. In fact, it is a care which has strict boundaries and which challenges the
core member to change and to help themselves. Nonetheless, it is an unconditional and
tender and wise way of accompanying people on leaving prison. There is already
considerable evidence indicating that Basic Caring Communities is a most effective way of
reducing re-offending. I recommend to all our Catholic parishes this scheme, as an excellent
way of fulfilling the Lord's words %Whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me.+