

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

Post Release from Prison

“We are still a long way from the time when our conscience can be certain of having done everything possible to prevent crime and to control it effectively so that it no longer does harm and, at the same time, *to offer to those who commit crimes a way of redeeming themselves and making a positive return to society.*”

Pope John Paul II, July 9, 2000¹

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 parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15) illustrates God’s merciful love for us and models how we should treat one another. In spite of his son’s reckless life and squandering of his inheritance, the father celebrates the prodigal son because the son has repented and changed his life. Jesus tells us that the lost who have been found are to be welcomed and celebrated.²

Ex-offenders are children of God. Human dignity, the cornerstone of Catholic social teaching, is not earned by good behavior; it is something we all possess as people who are created in the image and likeness of God.³

Solidarity also is a core principle of Catholic social teaching. This principle calls us to see the face of Christ in everyone and to see each other as brothers and sisters--common members of the human family. As members of the human community, we recognize that we are responsible for one another. We naturally work for the safety and well being of our family and neighbors; solidarity demands that we work for justice for all.⁴

Our faith calls us to hold people accountable for their actions, but also to forgive and work for healing for those who are troubled.⁵ This faith commitment has substantive implications for how we treat those who have been released from prison.

Individual and community acceptance of ex-offenders with love and understanding is necessary for their integration into normal community living.⁶ Successful integration requires that we welcome ex-offenders back as participating members of our community.⁷ Much needs to be done to make this happen:

- Though over 600,000 people (1,600 each day) are released from prison each year, there is a serious shortage of vocational, educational, and substance abuse programs in our jails and prisons.⁸

- Much greater emphasis is needed on practical job training and post-release employment opportunities.⁹ Pre-release planning for prisoners should include visits by relatives, friends, and acquaintances. Work release and work training programs for prisoners who are approaching release from prison should be as extensive as possible.¹⁰ Career counseling, testing, and guidance should be provided to all who are preparing to be released.¹¹
- Catholic institutions, including parishes, schools, and agencies should help provide rehabilitative services for former inmates.¹² Parishes could consider making church property available for transition houses or providing other services that can address the spiritual, material, and emotional assistance that elude the resources of many parole and probation systems.¹³ Our parishes can train volunteers to help nourish the faith life of ex-offenders.¹⁴ Parishes can develop mentoring programs to help with the difficult transition back to a normal life. All of these services will provide love and support for ex-offenders while offering the opportunity to educate parishioners about Catholic social teaching and restorative justice.¹⁵
- We call on people to promote policies that put more resources into restoration, education, and substance abuse treatment programs.¹⁶
- We join the American Bar Association in deploring the creation of unnecessary legal barriers that make it difficult for prisoners to receive further education. The Bar Association points in particular to those laws that make those persons convicted of even minor drug offenses ineligible for federal student educational loans.¹⁷ Education is critical for the ex-offender's successful reintegration into society and for his/her ability to become a productive citizen. We should be helping ex-offenders with retraining and education, not hindering them.
- We believe that ex-offenders should have the right to vote after they are released from prison.¹⁸

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 gospel of Jesus Christ will we increase security and safety in our communities.

¹ "Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice," U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, November 15, 2000. [Hereafter RRR]. This quote is from the very first quote in the document.(Emphasis supplied).

² RRR section on Scriptural Foundations, p. 19.

³ RRR, Human Life and Dignity, p. 21.

⁴ RRR, Subsidiarity and Solidarity, p.25.

⁵ RRR, Policy Directions, Number 6, p.36.

⁶ 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.

⁷ RRR, Policy Directions, Number 7, p. 39.

⁸ The Sentencing Project, “Prisoners Re-Entering the Community,” www.sentencingproject.org

⁹ RCI, Recommendation 10.

¹⁰ RCI, Suggested Action Steps and Recommendation 14.

¹¹ RCI, Recommendation 17.

¹² RRR, Church Mission, Number 1, p. 48.

¹³ RRR, Suggestions for Action, Reach Out to Offenders and Their Families, p.49.

¹⁴ RRR, Policy and Directions, Number 8, p. 41.

¹⁵ RRR, Church Mission, Number 3, p. 50.

¹⁶ RRR, Church Mission, Number 5, p 52.

¹⁷ American Bar Association Report. See Henry Weinstein, “US Justice System is Broken,” Lawyers Say,” Los Angeles Times, June 24, 2004.

¹⁸ RRR, Policy Directions, Number 7, p. 53.