

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

Women in Prison

“While the vast majority of inmates in the United States are men, the number of women being incarcerated has increased 600 percent since 1980, largely as a result of tougher drug laws. This rate of increase is higher than the rate of increase for men. Seventy percent of female inmates are non-violent offenders, and an equal number have left children behind, often in foster care, as they enter prison.” 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.

As we studied the issues involved in criminal justice over these past three years, we have found that the population of women in prison in the U.S. is escalating faster than that of men in prison. In fact, the U.S. now has 10 times more women in prison than the combined nations of Western Europe with approximately the same number of women in the population.¹

The testimony of a volunteer teacher in a women’s prison captures the key issues: “It’s difficult to summarize the stories I’ve heard and the experiences I’ve had behind the razor wire, but the simple fact is that most women in our correctional system are poor, and many were accomplices to crimes committed by their boyfriends or husbands. They are now held in a system largely designed by and for men, despite the fact that incarcerated women are usually not a threat to public safety, nor are they likely to attempt escape. The majority are single parents of minor children. They tend to be depressed rather than angry. They are pregnant; they are mothers and grandmothers. They are undereducated and underemployed. Most should be in treatment, not in jail.”²

Most women in prison are victims of severe and prolonged physical and/or sexual abuse. Statistics indicate that more than 57% of the women incarcerated in our nation’s prisons have suffered severe and prolonged physical and/or sexual abuse.³ Many grew up in a home with domestic violence, and they end up in abusive relationships. Moreover, while women are in prison, they are subject to more sexual misconduct, both from other prisoners and the correctional staff. According to the Government Accounting Office, the full extent of the problem is not known and likely underreported because of the fear of retaliation.⁴

Nine out of ten women in prison are substance abusers,⁵ and many are medicated while incarcerated. Often their boyfriends or spouses or even their parents led them into drug use. Many are clinically depressed or are diagnosed as bipolar, and the correction system’s way of dealing with these mental illnesses is to medicate them.⁶ There are few

opportunities for talking with a psychologist, and only a small percentage of women receive intensive substance abuse treatment.

Incarcerated women are generally mothers of minor children and suffer deeply as a result of separation from their families. Female prisoners suffer tremendous shame and guilt for their failure as parents and intense grief over their separation from their children. Even though intergenerational crime is well documented, the system erects many roadblocks to communication among family members.

Recognizing the situation as described above, we have a number of recommendations.

The overwhelming number of women in prison belong in treatment, classrooms leading to a General Education Diploma, and/or vocational training rather than in prison. This is particularly the case when they are pregnant or single mothers, who are non-violent drug offenders, convicted many times merely as accomplices.

We call for greater advocacy for using probation rather than incarceration. This would avoid placing dependent children on public welfare and leave the family intact. As a condition of probation, the women would be required to attend substance abuse programs, anger management, parenting classes, or GED programs. With the cost of probation being only a fraction of the cost of incarceration, this would be good public policy.

Educational opportunities are desperately needed. Nationwide, two out of three female inmates lack a high school diploma or GED.⁷ It has been demonstrated that recidivism goes down as educational levels go up, yet many facilities lack sufficient staff and programs to help those incarcerated move through Adult Basic Education to achieve their GED to prepare them for re-entry into society. Teachers are the most urgent and pressing need.

Vocational training must be greatly expanded. Despite the astronomical increase in their numbers, incarcerated women do not have the array of programs and job training typically available to men. They come into prison underemployed, and they leave prison with few options for making a decent living. Given that most of these women are the sole support of children, the need for job training is even more urgent.

“Pope Paul VI once wrote: ‘Within Christianity, more than in any other religion, and since its very beginning, women have had a special dignity, of which the New Testament shows us many important aspects.’”⁸ We do not tolerate sin or crime. But we bishops of the southern US call our people to recognize the dignity of those women who suffer from incarceration in our prison system and to help them toward responsibility, reconciliation and restoration.

¹ <http://www-personal.umich.edu/~lormand/agenda/0107/womenprison.htm>. Phillis Engelbert, “Women in Prison”, Agenda, July/August 2001.

² Note from Kathy Masulis, Nashville, TN 2005.

³ Cristina Rathbone, *A World Apart*, Random House, May 2005, p. 22.

⁴ GAO report “Women in Prison: Sexual Misconduct by Correctional Staff” June 1999, p.9.

⁵ Rathbone, p. 10.

⁶ Ibid., p. 9.

⁷ <http://www.wpaonline.org/institute/index.htm>. Women’s Prison Association, “A Portrait of Women in Prison,” December 2003.

⁸ *Mulieris Dignitatem*, John Paul II, p. 2.

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