

Shackled and cuffed: Prisoners need pastoral attention

VATICAN CITY – Prison doors may be locked shut, but people must not close their eyes to the inmates behind bars.

Vatican officials conveyed that message at an international gathering of prison chaplains in Rome, where Pope Benedict XVI called the pastoral care of prisoners a “vital mission” that deserved the support and guidance of bishops and the involvement of local Catholics. He told the chaplains he hoped greater awareness about their ministry would inspire others “to join you in performing corporal works of mercy.”

Last March, the pope demonstrated his solidarity with prisoners with a visit to a juvenile detention center in Rome. He reminded the young people of God’s love for them and said he was bringing “a little light” to an otherwise dark and lonely place.

At the mid-September congress, the head of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Cardinal Renato Martino, insisted that society could not “close its eyes, cannot be indifferent” to the living conditions, human rights abuses, and often-dim prospects of some of the 9 million men and women imprisoned around the world.

Cardinal Martino said it was not for the church to decide if someone is guilty or innocent. However, the church has a duty to “denounce all those situations that harm human dignity,” he said.

The death penalty, he said, only “impoverishes the society that legitimizes and carries it out” and “foment[s] revenge” instead of real justice.

Pope Benedict, in a speech to the congress, recognized that a community has an obligation to keep its citizens safe, but he reminded governments that offenders must have a chance at rehabilitation. He, too, insisted inmates must never – under any circumstances – be demeaned or tortured.

Congress participants agreed that torture, humiliating practices and “institutional cruelty” were on the rise.

In their final declaration, the prison ministry workers from 62 different nations declared that capital punishment must be abolished worldwide and harsh penalties, especially torture, must end. They also lamented how “most prisons are overcrowded, the prisoners are abused and their needs are not satisfied.”

Debbie McDermott of the California Catholic Conference's detention ministry told the congress that her state's prison system "is in crisis." She said that "172,284 inmates are warehoused in 33 prisons designed for less than 100,000."

Almost 30,000 prisoners have been sentenced to life without parole, another 657 are on death row, and 4,200 people are locked away in solitary confinement, she said.

McDermott said California spends more than \$35,000 per inmate which, given the recidivism rate is 95-98 percent, does not sound like money well spent.

But despite the desperate conditions for many prisoners, she said, innovative chaplains are finding ways that respect a penitentiary's rules while bringing the Gospel and the sacraments to more prisoners - even to inmates in solitary confinement who are not allowed any human contact.

For example, in one solitary lockup unit, she said, guards bring the prisoners out of their cells "shackled and handcuffed and place them in individual cages so that the chaplain can provide pastoral care."

Father Ted Hughes, regional chaplain for prisons in Canada's prairie region, gave examples of positive ways the church has been able to bring pastoral care to offenders and victims alike.

In his written report, he said freed sex offenders, who are at a high risk of recommitting an abuse, are much less likely to re-offend when they become part of a "circle of support." Volunteers offer the offender friendship and, along with professionals, help him or her overcome daily challenges and achieve personal goals, he said.

The church also played a role in the recent development of an office within Canada's federal correctional system that addresses the needs of victims of crimes, he said.

Father Robert Schultze, director of prison ministry for the Diocese of Trenton, N.J., said restorative justice is perhaps the most important aspect of pastoral care work.

"Everything has to be done in the spirit of justice that restores victims and offenders, restores society that has been hurt" by crime or extreme violence, he told Catholic News Service after attending the Rome congress.

Shutting the door on a prisoner "is not the end of it. It's just the beginning of the conversation, shared prayer" that always will need to continue, he said.

Victims "need to be heard, attended to and taken seriously, and the fact that they have difficulty in forgiving, if at all, needs to be accepted," he said.

Victims need to know that they will not be "condemned as cold and unfeeling" if they

cannot find it in their hearts to forgive someone for their loss, he said.