

International Commission of Catholic Prison Pastoral Care  
(ICPPC)

International Meeting  
*Integral Human Development and the Catholic Prison Pastoral Care*  
Vatican, 7-8 November 2019.

Your Eminence, Excellencies, Distinguished Guests,

I am grateful for this opportunity to reflect with you on our shared ministry of the pastoral support for those deprived of liberty. This sits within the all-embracing mission of the Church to preach the good news of Jesus Christ, to be light and hope to the ends of the earth and the end of time.

I have with me today a visual aid which I bought in a prison in the Philippines some years ago. I bought it specifically because it has our *raison d'être* written on it. The wonderful quotation from St. Matthew's Gospel 'when I was in prison you came to see'. (Mt. 25:36). At least that's what I thought it said, until I got home and looked at it more carefully and discovered that it actually said 'when I was in prison you did not visit me' (Mt. 24:43). When I let that thought sink in to my mind, I was horrified. Here was a prisoner who felt alone, abandoned and losing hope. As a chaplain I thought I had failed him. I didn't know him but I wondered how many other prisoners felt this way. How many of them were in the prisons where I ministered.

After 25 years of working in prison pastoral care I could talk for ever on the subject of the social and ecclesial challenges we face today but I am limited to twenty minutes! So I will speak of four areas: firstly what chaplains want; secondly what the prisons want; thirdly what the church wants; and lastly but perhaps most importantly what prisoners want, drawing simply from my own experience and consultations.

What prison chaplains want:

I recently met with a group of chaplains and asked them what they felt they need to function better in their ministry. Here is an example of what they said:

Practical items:

- Initial induction training-protocols, security, etc.
- A list of abbreviations and acronyms so that they understand the language of the jail

- An organisational overview of the prison and where chaplains fit in with the organisational goals e.g. reducing recidivism.
- Manipulation/conditioning training
- Prison politics
- How to work the computer!
- The ability to 'shadow' another chaplain
- To have a 'go to' person –a mentor
- A map of the prison!

#### Organisational Practice:

- Time management
- How to work in multi-faith and multi disciplinary teams
- How to work with prison staff
- Networking- knowing staff and their various functions
- Managing Volunteers

#### Reflective practice:

- Knowing yourself
- Mindfulness and meditation
- Open to vulnerability
- Self-criticism
- Personal spiritual development-practicing your own faith
- Prayer Life.

#### What the prison wants from their chaplains:

##### Knowledge and skills practice:

- Theological and pastoral knowledge and skills
- Prison security
- Prison Rules
- Regime Awareness
- Understanding other faiths
- An ability to get things done
- Health and safety
- Information Handling
- Data protection
- Knowing boundaries
- Impartiality
- Listening skills
- Public speaking
- Putting people at ease

#### Education and training in chaplaincy:

- Bereavement skills
- Mental Health training
- Drug awareness
- Working with men. Women, young people-the different prison groups

#### Spiritual & Religious Assessment:

- Pastoral Skills
- Counselling Skills
- Spiritual Intelligence
- Building family relationships
- Know where to signpost – to direct prisons to the right person

#### Religious assessment and Intervention:

- How to perform religious functions – Mass, Bible studies etc.
- The ability to pray with others rather than just for others
- Religious tradition
- Pastoral care in a religious context.
- Building community and church contacts
- Music.

#### What the church wants:

Pope Francis has recalled an incident which helped shape his own understanding of what pastoral ministry requires, Aged 21 he was admitted to hospital with a life-threatening pleurisy. Following surgery, he believed his life was saved by a ward sister whose experience of such cases meant she tripled the prescribed dose of penicillin. The doctor, Pope Francis stated was a good man, but 'lived in a laboratory,' whereas the ward sister 'lived on the frontier and was in dialogue with it every day' (Austen Invereigh, *The Great Reformer*, 2014 p49-50).

As pastors we are not secluded in a laboratory. We too live on the frontier. We serve and engage in a dialogue with people, both within and outside the prison, both within and outside the church, who are formed not only by the Gospel and Catholic teaching but as we have recognised also by our society and culture, sometimes very powerfully. In our pastoral service we encounter the complexities and awkwardness of real life and the nitty gritty, Indeed, the frontier of our culture and society can be unreceptive, hostile and even toxic, to the truth of the good news brought to those in prison. Added to this we encounter those whose lives have been broken by difficult relationships, dysfunctional families, drug and alcohol abuse, violence,

poverty, broken homes, or who simply struggle to live according to the Church's moral teaching in its different aspects.

As we connect on many different fronts and at many different levels, we do so as pastors who are always both ministers of the Church and ministers to the Church. Holding these two elements together can be tricky, but it is essential. We model ourselves on the Lord Jesus who combines, in the most exemplary way, the full proclamation of the truth with the most loving and compassionate personal accompaniment.

Pastoral Accompaniment:

- Involves an ongoing pastoral relationship that is motivated by empathy and compassion – non judgemental
- Provides a clear welcome and never rejection
- Offers time, space and support so that a person's (I prefer this word to prisoner) situation and what is happening in their life can begin to be shared in the light of faith.
- Manifests the willingness to walk beside others in order to help them understand themselves in relation to Christ and His Gospel.
- Requires patience and kindness
- Is underpinned by prayer

Pastoral Discernment:

- Presumes a process of accompaniment
- Enables consideration of the realities present in a person's life in the light of the Church's teaching about the dignity of the human person
- Promotes the conversion of life and truth
- Resists isolated individual judgements and recognises there are no quick solutions
- May involve recourse to others for advice (e.g those who are experts in their fields. Or who exercise authority in the church or in the prison service.)

Pastoral Integration:

- Encourages everyone in a deepening relationship with Christ through their life of faith
- Seeks to enable involvement in the Church's life
- Whenever possible brings people into sacramental communion
- Sustains a sense of welcome and belonging in relation to the church.

What prisoners want:

All of the above!

One of the most heartbreaking statements I have heard (many times) as a prison chaplain is 'Fr. Brian you are all I've got'. You might think that would make me feel ten feet tall, swell my head with pride but actually it made my heart sink. There was almost an air of desperation in the voices who said- a deep sense of loneliness. I often ask prisoner to tell me their story, suspiciously they will ask 'why'? When I say it's because I'm interested, the flood gates open and I get their life-history. Many of the people I encounter in prison have had no one to share their story with – no one has seemed interested in them and as modern technology develops we will soon have more virtual friend than real.

Prisoners today simply want to be understood, accepted, treated with dignity and respect as is their right. They don't want anyone to walk in their shoes, that is their responsibility, but they do want someone to listen to them, to walk alongside them without blame, shame or fear. Someone who can show mercy, love and compassion. They do want to hear the truth from us but in a compassionate way.

As Pope John XXIII said at the opening of the Second Vatican Council:

"now the Bride of Christ wishes to use the medicine of mercy rather than taking up arms of severity...The Catholic Church as she holds high the torch of Catholic truth at this Ecumenical Council, wants to show herself a loving mother to all, patient, kind, moved by compassion and goodness towards her spiritual children" (MV4)

So we too as pastors must bear the 'torch of Catholic truth' in relation to those who are deprived of liberty, desiring to offer them 'the medicine of mercy' rather than 'arms of severity' animated by patience, kindness, compassion and goodness.