

Capitol Comments:

Discovering the Face of Christ in Every Prisoner

By Andrew Rivas, Executive Director, Texas Catholic Conference

Christ is in all of us, even those who have been sentenced to prison, stated His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI at the World Congress of The International Commission of Catholic Prison Pastoral Care.

When we hear those words, what is our first reaction? Is the Pope only calling prison ministers to look for Jesus in prisoners? Is it sufficient to ignore those who are incarcerated and hope that when they are released, they don't come back to our neighborhoods?

“For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, **in prison and you visited me.**”

–Matthew 26: 35-36.

Of course not! The Holy Father directs this message to all of us, and as Christians we cannot turn our backs on our brothers and sisters who have committed crimes. According to the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP), there are an estimated 6.7 million men and women in jail or prison, and on probation or on parole all across the United States—1 out of every 32 adults in our country. These are our brothers and sisters, and they provide us with an opportunity to serve Jesus, whose face we see in them.

The U.S. Bishops call for a new dialogue on crime and corrections, justice and mercy, and responsibility and treatment. As Catholics, we ask: How can we restore our respect for law and life? How can we protect and rebuild communities, confront crime without vengeance, and defend life without taking life?

Pope John Paul, speaking on the Day of Jubilee for Prisoners stated: *According to God's plan, all must play their part in helping to build a better society. Obviously, this includes making a great effort in the area of crime prevention. In spite of everything criminal actions are committed. For all to play their part in building the common good, they must work, in the measure of their competence, to ensure that prisoners have the means to redeem themselves, both as individuals and in their relations with society. Such a process is based on growth in the sense of responsibility. None of this should be considered utopian. Those who are in a position to do so must strive to incorporate these aims in the legal system.*

The challenge of curbing crime and reshaping the criminal justice system is not just a matter of public policy, but also a test. In the face of violence and crime, our faith calls the Church to responsibility and action. A Catholic approach begins with the recognition that the dignity of the human person applies to both victim and offender. Our tradition and our faith call us to seek reform alternatives that can hold offenders accountable and challenge them to change their lives, reach out to victims and reject vengeance, and restore our sense of community.

To learn about opportunities to volunteer in prison ministry, contact your local diocesan Criminal Justice ministry. For more information on the U.S. Bishops' Plan for Criminal Justice Reform, visit: Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and

Criminal Justice at www.usccb.org/sdwp/criminal.shtml or view our Criminal Justice Reform legislative priorities at www.TXcatholic.org

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