

Statement on Restorative Justice and Prison Ministry in the Archdiocese of Vancouver

Introduction

Prison ministry is essential to the life of the Church, one belonging to her fundamental mission of bringing the Good News to the poor and proclaiming release to captives (cf. Lk 4:18).

The criminal justice system in our country poses any number of challenges. What we can and should we do as an Archdiocese to meet these challenges?

The ways to overcome violence and to restore convicted criminals to society do not lend themselves to simple solutions. I address you not as a criminologist or expert, but as your Bishop armed only with the armour of the Church's teaching and the shield of good will, as one who bears a responsibility for all the sheep of the flock and, in particular, for those who need to be welcomed back from the deserts in which they have been wandering to the refreshing waters of life offered by the Good Shepherd.

Attitudes to Crime and Punishment

Regrettably, it seems as if Canadians prefer punishment to rehabilitation, and retribution to restoration. I am convinced that our Catholic faith offers a better alternative, one which, with God's grace, can accomplish three interlocking purposes. First, our faith tells us that we should hold offenders accountable and challenge them to change

their lives. Second, we should reach out to victims, helping them to lay aside their feelings of vengeance. And third, we should restore a sense of community and mutual responsibility within social life, resisting the glorification of violence that has engulfed so much of our culture.

Certainly, as we look across the landscape, we cannot ignore the underlying cultural values that help to create an environment where crime can flourish. Among those false values are a denial of the difference between right and wrong – what is often called moral relativism; an abandonment of personal responsibility, which leads us always to blame others for our own failures and misdeeds; an excessive focus on what “I” want and on my own desires; a diminishing sense of obligation to one’s children and one’s neighbours; and a misplaced emphasis on acquiring wealth and possessions, regardless of how they are obtained.

Given this situation, we face a challenge in Canada: that of reshaping the criminal justice system, not just a matter of public policy but also as a test of our commitment as Catholics. Our faith calls us to action.

A Vision Founded on Catholic Social Teaching

In some ways, an approach to criminal justice that is inspired by the vision of Catholic social doctrine presents a paradox. On the one hand, as believers we do not tolerate behaviour that threatens the lives

and violates the rights of others. We believe in responsibility, accountability and even necessary incarceration for the common good.

Those who harm others or damage property must be held accountable for the harm they have caused. To protect society and its members from violence and crime is an essential moral value. Crime, especially violent crime, not only endangers individuals, but robs communities of their sense of well-being and security. All people should be able to live in safety. Families must be able to raise their children without fear. Removing dangerous people from society is essential to ensure public safety.

Nonetheless, and on the other hand, a Catholic approach to criminal justice requires that we not give up on those who violate society's laws. It recognizes that social causes and personal choices can both be factors in crime. Our teaching strives to combine helping offenders to accept responsibility for their wrongdoing but, at the same time, it insists that every effort be made for their rehabilitation and return to society.

We believe that both victims and their offenders are children of God. Despite their very different claims on the conscience and intervention of society, the lives and dignity of both must always be respected and protected and. Moreover, Catholics are inspired by the desire to seek justice, not vengeance. Therefore, we believe that

punishment, if it is to be morally acceptable, must have two clear purposes: safeguarding citizens and society, and rehabilitating into society those who violate the law. So states the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: punishment “has a medicinal purpose: as far as possible, it must contribute to the correction of the guilty party” (n. 2266). The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* puts it this way when speaking of the right and duty of public authority to inflict punishment according to the crime committed:

Punishment does not serve merely the purpose of defending the public order and guaranteeing the safety of persons; it becomes as well an instrument for the correction of the offender, a correction that also takes on the moral value of expiation when the guilty party voluntarily accepts his punishment (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2266). There is a twofold purpose here. On the one hand, encouraging the re-insertion of the condemned person into society; on the other, fostering a justice that reconciles, a justice capable of restoring harmony in social relationships disrupted by the criminal act committed (n. 403).

Restorative Justice

A very helpful concept to understand and improve the criminal justice system in light of Christian principles is frequently referred to as

“restorative justice.” Indeed, Pope Benedict has recently written: “Pastoral workers have the task of studying and recommending *restorative justice* as a means and a process for promoting reconciliation, justice and peace, and the return of victims and offenders to the community.”¹

This kind of justice involves offenders, their victims and society at large. First, it focuses on the victim and the community harmed by the crime. This affirms the hurt and loss of the victim as well as the harm and fear of the community, and insists that offenders come to grips with the consequences of their actions as responsible persons. Offenders need to acknowledge their responsibility and be willing to be rehabilitated and to make amends to the victims, their families and the wider community.

Such accountability by offenders also offers to the victims of crime a much greater sense of peace. Restorative justice gives victims an opportunity to be heard, so that reparation and restitution might be achieved. Offenders have to take on the responsibility to repair the harm to victims, their families and communities. This process could include opportunities for offenders to develop new skills, the capacity to avoid future crime and preparations to re-enter society as responsible persons

¹ Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus* (19 November 2011), 83.

and rebuild their lives.

Society needs to experience that the right order, which has been violated by crime, has been restored. Restorative justice is a way of ensuring the restoration of social harmony. It helps the community to feel that crimes committed have been dealt with fairly and with sufficient concern for public safety and security.

What Should We Do?

Now I would like to suggest to you some ways that the people of the Archdiocese can commit themselves to take increasingly to heart the Gospel command to love their incarcerated neighbours, their victims, all families concerned, and society as a whole.

Five such suggestions follow. They are put forward in response to observations made by Blessed John Paul II:

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. If all those in some way involved in the problem tried to . . . develop this line of thought, perhaps humanity as a whole could take a great step forward in

creating a more serene and peaceful society.²

My suggestions are intended to call all of us – me, as well as the whole Archdiocese in all its members – to a deeper conversion of heart and to action: to putting into practice the fundamental principles of restorative justice.

1. Extend Pastoral Care

First, we should increase our efforts to offer pastoral care to victims, offenders and the families of both. This entails initiatives on the parish and archdiocesan level to support prisoners when they are released.

Our ability to carry out the mission mandated by the Gospel of visiting those in prison (cf. Mt 25:36) requires the cooperation of prison authorities and government policy makers. Because it serves the common good, all of us together should encourage inmates, in accordance with their religious beliefs, to seek spiritual counselling and formation, and to participate in worship. Genuine participation in religious activities is a road to rehabilitation for those who have committed crimes. This includes contact with trained parish volunteers who help nourish the faith life of inmates.

We should be alert to any attempts to curtail prisoners' expression

² Blessed John Paul II, Homily, Jubilee for Prisoners (9 July 2000).

of their religious beliefs. Such limitations are not only impede rehabilitation efforts, but are also contrary to Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982). For this reason, it is necessary vehemently to oppose limitations on the authentic religious expression of prisoners and any roadblocks not demanded by the genuine interests of security that would inhibit carrying out pastoral ministry by chaplains and volunteers.

Priests are strongly encouraged to extend their sacramental ministry to the imprisoned and to victims among their parishioners, as well as to their respective families. Likewise, I urge greater participation by Religious and the many movements in the Archdiocese in prison ministry. Lastly, I call upon the lay faithful to consider the possibility that God may be calling them to volunteer their time to visit Jesus in our prisons.

2. Work with the Media

Second, we should work more with the local media and use all available means of social communication to tell stories which portray successful efforts of rehabilitation and restoration.

The media plays a pivotal role to play in the formation of public attitudes toward crime and punishment. We should invite them to use their power responsibly; that is, to further truth, true justice and the common good, and to resist the temptation to sensationalize the plight of victims or offenders. All of us ought help others to recognize the crucial

difference between restorative justice and vengeful punishment.

3. Foster Education

Third, it is incumbent upon us to expand opportunities in our schools and parishes for education about crime, punishment and restorative justice. Education is a powerful force for renewal in understanding the Church's social teaching.

4. Address Public Policy Issues

Fourth, I encourage you to exhort our appointed and elected officials to renounce any purely punitive, vengeful or simplistic approaches to crime and punishment. We can be all too easily led astray by those who seek popularity by speaking as if those convicted of crimes are undeserving of our compassion and love.

As people of faith and as citizens, we are called to become involved in civil society and to advocate for policies that reflect Christian truth and values. Current approaches to crime, victims and violence often fall short of the teaching of Christ. Policies that simply call for more prisons and harsher sentences are neither effective nor worthy of Canadians.

Instead of concentrating our limited resources on building more prisons, we should insist that policy makers look more deliberately at the root causes which contribute to crime such as poverty, unemployment, lack of good education, drug and alcohol addiction, the breakdown of the

family and the culture of violence in our society. Because the disintegration of family life and community has been a major contributor to crime, supporting and rebuilding family ties must be central to efforts to prevent and respond to crime. Placing prisons in remote areas diminishes contacts with close relatives and undermines the family connections that could aid in restoration, especially for young offenders.

Public policy that promotes the rehabilitation of offenders and their peaceful restoration to social life must be our aim. Those in prison often need psychological counselling, spiritual direction, education and medical care to overcome their problems and disorders. While this investment costs money, in the long run such spending is cost-effective and reflects a truly Catholic understanding of social justice and the common good.

5. Extend Prison Ministry to Families of Victims and Offenders

Fifth, it would be very desirable to extend even more our outreach to those who are victims of crime and to their loved ones. They have suffered directly at the hands of those who violated their dignity and rights. As a Catholic community we should reach out to them in sympathy and solidarity, encouraging them to move beyond their understandable feelings of vengeance and to look to Jesus on the Cross who forgave not just the repentant thief but all of us. We can never compromise our conviction that Christlike forgiveness brings healing

and frees those who have suffered so unjustly to move on in their life with fewer paralyzing wounds.

Likewise we ought to reach out to the families of those who are incarcerated. They are also in need of our pastoral presence. Seeing a loved one fail to live up to family ideals, community values and the requirements of the law causes intense pain. The Gospel calls us as people of faith to minister to the families of those imprisoned and especially to the children who lose a parent to incarceration.

In closing allow me to express my profound appreciation and admiration to all our chaplains and to all those in prison ministry for their dedicated and selfless service. The Church and society are deeply indebted to them.

This Statement is adapted from a talk given at Prison Ministry Development Day on October 20, 2012, at St. Andrew Kim Parish.

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