

ARTICLE

Prison Ministry is for the whole Church not just for those behind the walls

By Senior Catholic Prison Chaplain Sister Veronica Casey PBVM

- **Senior Catholic Prison Chaplain Sister Veronica Casey represented New Zealand Catholic prison chaplains in Rome last month at the International Meeting of the Regional and National Ministers of the Penitentiary Pastoral, promoted by the Vatican's Dicastery for the Service of Integral Human Development, on the theme: "Integral Human Development and the Catholic Penitentiary Pastoral"**

Travelling to Rome for a two-day meeting may seem extravagant but that is what I did in November. The Dicastery for Integrated Human Development – a new dicastery created by Pope Francis – invited some regional and national leaders in prison ministry to gather for a meeting to exchange experiences with others, to identify the challenges and needs of this ministry, and to strengthen the collaboration between the Dicastery and the various actors of Catholic prison ministry.

About 45 people attended from 35 countries, the majority being ordained priests. Each participant shared the state of the ministry in their particular country; in no way could New Zealand be compared with the many countries where chaplains are required to bring food, medicines and other necessities to prisoners, and where the prisons are so over-crowded that the detainees take turns at sleeping, because there is no room for them all to lie down together.

However the issues of poverty, ethnic minorities, and mental illness are key characteristics of prison populations everywhere. One difference for New Zealand is that prison ministry is focused on those in prison – all other countries represented at the meeting are involved with the families and with those being released from prison.

The key highlight of the meeting was an audience with Pope Francis where he addressed the group and then met each of us individually. Pope Francis has a deep concern for people in prison. He addressed the group with a challenging and inspiring address in which he urged for change in the outlook and approach in treating prisoners, who he said must be offered equal opportunities for reform, development and reintegration. He noted that society found it easier and more comfortable to suppress than to educate; easier to deny the injustice present in society; easier to create spaces for shunting off offenders into oblivion rather than offer equal opportunities for development as citizens. He described this as an educated way of discarding people.

The Pope urged today's society to overcome stigmatising someone who has made a mistake. Instead of offering them help and adequate resources to live a dignified life, he said, we are accustomed to discarding the person rather than making efforts for them to return to the love of God in his or her life. People often leave prison facing an alien world that

does not recognize them as trustworthy, denying them the possibility of working for a dignified livelihood. When they are prevented from regaining their dignity they are again exposed to the lack of opportunities in the midst of violence and insecurity. He stressed that they have already served their sentence and should not be subject to a new social punishment with rejection and indifference. Such exclusion exposes them to falling back on the same mistakes.

Pope Francis then went off script and gave us an image to take home: firstly, he said that one cannot speak about debt repayment by prisoners without offering them a window; and one cannot change one's life without seeing a horizon. We were asked to make sure our prisons always have a window and a horizon.

The experience of this meeting, learning of the trials and struggles of others in the ministry and being part of a worldwide mission supported at the highest level of the church was an affirming and inspiring experience. If nothing else it stressed that prison ministry is a ministry for the whole church and is so much wider than just behind the walls. Meeting Pope Francis reinforced this with his address of calling us all to remember that we are all made in the image and likeness of God and everyone has a place at God's table.

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NOTE: Prison chaplaincy in New Zealand is a wholly ecumenical service governed by Prison Chaplaincy Service of Aotearoa New Zealand, which is a trust board comprised of members of Christian churches. The trust board holds contracts to provide religious and spiritual services to all in New Zealand prisons. The service is provided by paid chaplains, including Catholic chaplains, and by approximately 1400 volunteers from many denominations.