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.” (Mt. 25)

May 19, 2020

Statement of Solidarity: A Catholic Response to COVID-19 Behind Bars

Pope Francis urges all of us not to forget those in prison and detention. No matter the harm one has caused or suffered, every person is made in the image of God and should be treated with dignity and respect. COVID-19 has affected everyone, especially the most vulnerable among us. The pandemic is particularly devastating to those living in prisons, jails, and detention centers who are very difficult to keep sanitary due to frequent entry and exit of staff and, in the case of immigrant detention, frequent transfers of detainees among facilities. Limited resources for preventative measures, protective equipment, and health care can create conditions that allow the virus to wreak havoc. Reports of lack of testing suggest measurements of the impact of the virus are incomplete. We are deeply concerned that experiencing COVID-19 from behind bars could, for some, mean a death sentence.

Those returning home from incarceration face unprecedented distress during the pandemic. Due to their criminal record, which in some states limits access to employment and assistance for housing and nutrition, and other basic human needs, returning citizens are now even more challenged since existing social services are overwhelmed. Similarly, released immigrant detainees can encounter tremendous obstacles in receiving adequate access to care and transportation to be reunited with loved ones, and to offer spiritual support. Attorneys also do not have regular access to their clients. Isolation, without family visits or visitors and limited or no holy communion or the Eucharist, or to offer spiritual support. Attorneys also do not have regular access to deliver sacraments, notably the Anointing of the Sick and the death sentence.

We urge our fellow Catholics to join us in standing in solidarity with our all too often forgotten brothers and sisters who are affected by incarceration and detention. The COVID-19 crisis presents profound challenges for our country and the world. As we struggle to care for those in need and keep our communities safe, Pope Francis reminds us that there are no “throwaway lives.” As a Church, we are being challenged to creatively consider ways to be present to people behind bars and to those returning home—to see each other’s wounds, meet their pressing needs, and to become agents of God’s restorative work in the world.

The challenges to this population are also unique. Prison chaplains and ministers have very limited access to deliver sacraments, notably the Anointing of the Sick and the Eucharist, to offer spiritual support. Attorneys also do not have regular access to their clients. Isolation, without family visits or visitors and limited or no holy communion or the Eucharist, or to offer spiritual support. Attorneys also do not have regular access to deliver sacraments, notably the Anointing of the Sick and the death sentence.

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