

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

May 19, 2020

"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)

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 every community, especially the most vulnerable among us. The pandemic is particularly devastating to those living and working in prisons, jails, and detention and re-entry centers where close quarters have resulted in a dangerous spread of the disease.

As a Catholic community we wish to convey a message of solidarity to currently and formerly incarcerated and detained individuals, their loved ones, as well as those who are charged with their care and well-being. 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 impacts of the coronavirus in jails, prisons, and detention centers are severe. Thousands of incarcerated individuals and facility staff members have tested positive for COVID-19, and over 100 people have died.

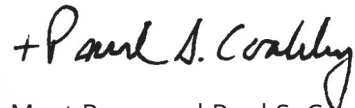
These reports also show that COVID-19 presents a profound challenge and responsibility for caring for those incarcerated and detained. Jails, prisons, and detention centers are very difficult to keep sanitary due to frequent entry and exit of staff and, in the case of immigrant detention, frequent transfers 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 *de facto* death sentence.

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, or to offer spiritual support. Attorneys also do not have regular access to their clients. Isolation, without family visits or visitors and limited or unaffordable virtual visits, increases anxiety and fear.

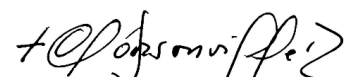
Those returning home from incarceration face unprecedented distress during the pandemic. Due to their criminal record, which in some states limits access to employment and assistance for housing and nutrition, and other basic human needs, returning citizens are now even more challenged since existing 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 need social support to ensure compliance with immigration proceedings and successful community integration.

Those who are incarcerated or detained, and those caring for them, remain in our prayers. We also continue to urge political leaders to make all efforts to ensure the health, safety, and spiritual well-being of those inside, including correctional and detention staff. The COVID-19 crisis presents profound challenges for our country and our 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.

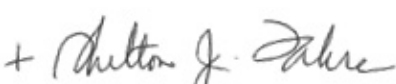
Sincerely,



Most Reverend Paul S. Coakley
Archbishop of Oklahoma City
Chair, Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops



Most Rev. Mario E. Dorsonville
Auxiliary Bishop of Washington
Chair, Committee on Migration
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops



Most Rev. Shelton J. Fabre
Bishop of Houma-Thibodaux
Chair, Ad Hoc Committee Against Racism
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops



Most Rev. Gerald F. Kicanas
Bishop Emeritus of Tucson
Chair, Subcommittee on Certification for Ecclesial Ministry and Service
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops



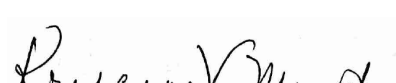
Most Rev. Nelson J. Pérez
Archbishop of Philadelphia
Chair, Committee on Cultural Diversity in the Church
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops



Sr. Mary Haddad, RSM
President & CEO
Catholic Health Association



Sister Donna Markham, OP, Ph.D.
President & CEO
Catholic Charities USA



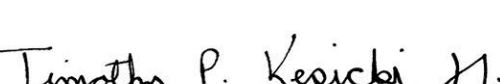
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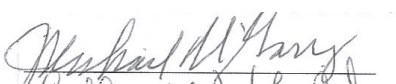
Mary Tyler Curtis
Executive Director
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Very Reverend Timothy P. Kesicki, S.J.
President
Jesuit Conference of Canada and the United States



David Lichter, DMin
Executive Director
National Association of Catholic Chaplains



Mike McGarry and Collins Whitfield
Co-Chairs of the Apostolate
North American Prison Ministry Apostolate of the Order of Malta