



# The Holy See

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***ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI  
TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE XVII COUNCIL OF EUROPE  
CONFERENCE OF DIRECTORS OF PRISON ADMINISTRATION***

*Clementine Hall  
Thursday, 22 November 2012*

*Your Excellency,  
Deputy Secretary General,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

I am glad to be able to receive you on the occasion of your Conference and I would like, first of all, to thank the Justice Minister of the Italian Government, Professor Paola Severino, and the Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Dr Gabriella Battaini-Dragoni, for their words of greeting, addressed to me on behalf of all present.

Matters of criminal justice are continually being brought to the attention of the public and of governments, especially at a time when economic and social inequalities and increasing individualism are feeding the roots of criminality. There is a tendency, though, to limit the debate to the legislative aspect of the question of crime and punishment or to the judicial process – how best to arrive swiftly at a sentence that corresponds as closely as possible to the true facts. Less attention is given to the way custodial sentences are carried out. In this regard, alongside the parameter of “justice”, another essential element is respect for human dignity and human rights. Yet this too, while indispensable and unfortunately still far from being observed in many countries, is not enough to safeguard fully the rights of the individual. A concrete commitment is needed, not just a statement of principle, in order to bring about the offender’s effective re-education, which is required both for the sake of his own dignity and with a view to his reintegration into society. The prisoner’s personal need to undergo in prison a process of rehabilitation and maturation is actually a need of society itself, both because it stands to regain someone who can make a useful contribution to the common good, and also because such a process makes the prisoner less likely

to reoffend and thus endanger society. In recent years there has been considerable progress, even if there is still a long way to go. It is not just a question of releasing sufficient financial resources to make the prison environment more dignified and to ensure more effective means of support and paths of formation for prisoners: a change in mentality is also needed, so as to link the debate regarding respect for the human rights of prisoners with the broader debate concerning the actual implementation of criminal justice.

If human justice in this area is to look to divine justice and be shaped by that higher vision, the re-educational purpose of the sentence must be regarded not as an ancillary or secondary aspect of the penal system, but rather as its culminating and defining feature. In order to “practise justice”, it is not enough that those found guilty of crimes be simply punished: it is necessary that in punishing them, everything possible be done to correct and improve them. When this does not happen, justice is not done in an integral sense. In any event, it is important to avoid giving rise to a situation where imprisonment that fails in its re-educational role becomes counter-educational and paradoxically reinforces rather than overcomes the tendency to commit crime and the threat posed to society by the individual.

As Directors of Prison Administration, you can make a significant contribution, together with all those responsible for the administration of justice in society, towards promoting this “more genuine” justice that is “open to the liberating power of love” (John Paul II, *Message for the Jubilee in Prisons, 9 July 2000*) and is tied to human dignity. Your role, in a certain sense, is even more crucial than that of the legislators, since even when adequate structures and resources are in place, the effectiveness of re-educational strategies always depends on the sensitivity, ability and attentiveness of those called to put into practice what is prescribed on paper. The task of prison officers, at whatever level they operate, is by no means easy. That is why today, through you, I would like to pay tribute to all those in prison administration who carry out their duties with diligence and dedication. Contact with offenders paying the price for what they have done and the commitment needed to restore dignity and hope to people who in many cases have already suffered marginalization and scorn call to mind the mission of Christ himself, who came to call not the just, but sinners (cf. *Mt 9:13; Mk 2:17; Lk 5:32*), the privileged recipients of divine mercy. Everyone is called to become his brother’s keeper, transcending the homicidal indifference of Cain (cf. *Gen 4:9*). You in particular are asked to take custody of people who, in prison conditions, are at greater risk of losing their sense of life’s meaning and the value of personal dignity, yielding instead to discouragement and despair. Profound respect for persons, commitment to the rehabilitation of prisoners, fostering a genuinely educational community: these things are all the more urgent, in view of the growing number of “foreign prisoners”, whose circumstances are often difficult and precarious. Clearly, it is essential that the role of prison institutions and staff be matched by a corresponding willingness on the part of the prisoner to undergo a period of formation. Yet it is not enough simply to wait and hope for a positive response: this should be solicited and encouraged by means of initiatives and programmes capable of overcoming idleness and breaking the isolation in which prisoners are often trapped. Particularly important in this regard

is the promotion of forms of evangelization and spiritual care, capable of drawing out the most noble and profound side of the prisoner, awakening his enthusiasm for life and his desire for beauty, so characteristic of people who discover anew that they bear within them the indelible image of God.

Where there is confidence in the possibility of renewal, prison can perform its re-educational function and become the occasion for the offender to taste the redemption won by Christ through the Paschal Mystery, which guarantees victory over all evil.

Dear friends, I thank you sincerely for this meeting and for all that you do, and I invoke upon you and your work abundant divine blessings.