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Pope's message on prison goes unheeded

By KENNETH E. HARTMAN

It was with great hope that thousands of Catholic prisoners and I read Pope John Paul II's "Message for the Jubilee in Prisons" in 2000. The closing words filled us with a sense of community with the rest of the church: "Assuring the men and women who are in prison throughout the world that I am close to them in spirit, I embrace them all as brothers and sisters in the human family." Powerful words that reached right into the heart of our dilemma, words that spoke through the vast divide we experience between ourselves and the free world. I never felt closer to the church or more optimistic about the future.

In the intervening years, the reality on the ground has filled me with a profound sense of abandonment and frustration. We have waited for that loving embrace from our church, but it has failed to materialize. Catholic prisoners, like all prisoners in this country, remain pariahs, modern-day lepers wandering outside the community. After hearing the leader of our church address the need for a fully committed effort on the part of the church to ameliorate the negative effects of prison, we can only conclude that the failure to act is one of deliberate neglect.

The prison population in America now tops 2 million, and the rate of incarceration grows apace with extraordinarily long sentencing structures. The underlying philosophy of corrections has devolved into an unadulterated form of vengeance. As the pope noted in his homily at the Regina Coeli Prison, "Punishment cannot be reduced to mere retribution, much less take the form of social retaliation or a sort of institutional vengeance." The direction of corrections in this country runs counter to this admonition. Fewer prisoners are offered meaningful work, educational and vocational programs are being cut back, visiting is being severely limited, and most other rehabilitative programs have been pared down to pay for still more prison cells. The media is routinely barred from prisons, dropping a cloak of invisibility over us. In a growing number of so-called "super-max" facilities, prisoners are confined to small cells for upwards of 23 hours a day, often for decades.

The church has stood on the sidelines of these developments, issuing meek appeals to the same demagogues who have ridden the tough-on-crime bandwagon to political success. Now is a golden moment to intervene effectively. The states are mired in budget deficits while still working to maintain their bloated prison infrastructures. As vital services are cut back, the public continues to be hoodwinked into believing the criminal justice system cannot be reformed. The church should be offering well-thought plans consistent with the Jubilee message of hope and restoration. That it is not reveals a lack of commitment to prison reform.

On a personal level, it is equally disheartening to feel the lack of support from the people in the local Catholic community, who seem to be mostly uninterested in our welfare. Shortly after the Jubilee message, we did see a brief flurry of activity, but within a few months we were back to square one. It was as if these surely well-intentioned people made their obligatory penance, came and visited us in prison and then forgot us again. I hold no malice toward them because when the church called they did the right thing. The church just stopped calling.

There needs to be a reexamination of the Holy Father's Jubilee message on prison. Parish priests need to call for Catholics to become involved in the lives of imprisoned fellow Catholics. Our families need to be supported and strengthened. Most important, parishes located near prisons should become intimately involved in our lives. Every Mass celebrated in prison should be attended by community members. The worst aspect of prison is the sense of isolation from the wider world. It is the root cause of most of the despair and self-destructive behavior that characterizes the prison experience. Those few times I had the good fortune to attend a service with free people are etched on my heart. I felt that I was a part of the church in ways I generally don't.

The church needs to divert resources to supporting prisoners and their families in visiting and educational needs. Volunteers need to be recruited and assisted in aiding prisoners. The church hierarchy needs to stop dancing with mean-spirited politicians, and speak the truth to power. What is wrong should be called wrong, in ringing language, backed up with meaningful actions.

I believe that the Catholic church, my church, is the repository of truth in the world. I also believe that words do not equal actions. "For just as a body without spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead" (James 2:26). I believe the faith of the Catholic community needs to be channeled into the great works of corporal mercy, including helping those in prison and our families. The more than half million Catholic prisoners in this country are still waiting for that loving embrace from our brothers and sisters.

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