

Summary

Building Bridges, Not Walls: Prisons and the Justice System

In the Social Justice Statement for 2011–2012, the Catholic Bishops of Australia urge all Australians to think about the conditions in our prisons, and to ask who are most likely to find themselves there and why.

The Statement, titled *Building Bridges, Not Walls: Prisons and the justice system*, points out that between 1984 and 2008, while rates of crime either stayed steady or fell, the number of Australians in prison per 100,000 people almost doubled. The majority of Australian prisoners come from the most disadvantaged sections of the community: the underprivileged, those suffering from mental illness, and especially Indigenous people, who make up about 2.3 per cent of the Australian population but about a quarter of those in prison. The incarceration rate for young Indigenous people is even higher.

The disproportionate growth in imprisonment has come about in part because of repeated law-and-order election campaigns and sensationalist reporting, which encourage the idea that crime is out of control.

Certainly there will always be a need for prisons, but it is time for Australians to ask what they expect from their prison systems. Is jail simply somewhere to warehouse wrongdoers until they have served their sentences, or can it be a place where inmates learn to become responsible members of the wider society? How can we support those who have committed no crime but suffer terribly because their loved ones are incarcerated? This is an issue that especially affects children with a parent who has been imprisoned.

And what can we do to support those who have paid their debt to society but must overcome obstacles to finding work, a place to live and a place in our community?

The Statement celebrates the work of chaplains and all who work to bring hope and support to prisoners.

Jesus Christ never neglected outcasts and criminals – in fact, he sought them out to bring them his message of salvation and redemption. Inspired by the message and ministry of Jesus, the bishops present us with five challenges: to confront fear campaigns about law and order; to address the social factors that contribute to crime; to maintain the dignity of prisoners; to help prisoners after release; and to seek practical alternatives to imprisonment.

No crime can diminish the fact that we are all created in the image and likeness of God. In our parishes and our communities, let us consider how we can make a difference for those in prison and seeking bridges to a new life.

Bulletin note

The Bishops would welcome promotion of the Statement in the weeks leading up to Social Justice Sunday. A possible entry in your parish bulletin or newsletter could be:

We celebrate Social Justice Sunday on 25 September. This year's Social Justice Statement is titled: 'Building Bridges, not Walls: Prisons and the justice system'.

The Statement asks Catholics to think about conditions in our prisons, who is sentenced to prison and why. Rates of imprisonment in Australia have risen sharply although levels of crime have remained steady. The most disadvantaged in Australia are the most likely to be imprisoned.

For further details about the Social Justice Statement, visit the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council website (www.socialjustice.catholic.org.au) or call (02) 8306 3499.

Associated resources

The ACSJC website (www.socialjustice.catholic.org.au) will have resources available for download free of charge before Social Justice Sunday. They will include Social Justice Sunday Liturgy Notes, a Power-Point presentation and resources for schools and social justice groups.

Prayer Cards and 'Ten Steps' leaflets can be ordered from the ACSJC on (02) 8306 3499 or by email: admin@acsjc.org.au