



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT TO THE REBIBBIA DISTRICT PRISON (ROME)

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Rebibbia

Sunday, 18 December 2011

[Video]

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I have come among you this morning with great joy and excitement for a visit that fits in well a few days before the celebration of the Lord's birth. I address a warm welcome to everyone, and in particular to Hon. Ms Paola Severino, Minister of Justice, and to the chaplains whom I thank for their words of welcome, which they have addressed to me also on your behalf. I greet Dr Carmelo Cantone, Director of the District Prison and his co-workers, the penitentiary police and the volunteers who do their utmost for the activities of this institution. And I greet in a special way all of you inmates, expressing my closeness to you.

"I was in prison and you came to me" (Mt 25:36). These are the words of the Last Judgement, recounted by Matthew the Evangelist, and the Lord's words, which he identified with inmates, that express to the full the meaning of my visit to you today. Wherever there is someone hungry, a foreigner, a sick person, a prisoner, there is Christ himself, who is waiting for our visit and our help. This is the main reason why I am glad to be here, to pray, to converse and to listen.

Among the corporal works of mercy the Church has always listed the visit to prisoners (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2447). To be complete this requires a full capacity for welcoming the inmates, "making room for them in our own time, in our home, in our friendships, in our laws, in our cities" (cf. Italian Episcopal Conference, *Evangelizzazione e testimonianza della carità*, n. 39). I would actually like to listen to the personal story of each one of you but this is

unfortunately impossible. Nevertheless I have come to tell you quite simply that God loves you with an infinite love and that you are always God's children. And the Only Begotten Son of God himself, the Lord Jesus, had the experience of prison, he was subjected to being sentenced by a tribunal and suffered the most brutal condemnation to capital punishment.

On the occasion of my recent [Apostolic Journey to Benin last November](#), I signed a [Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation](#) in which I reaffirmed the Church's attention to justice in states, writing: "independent judiciary and prison systems are urgently needed, therefore, for the restoration of justice and the rehabilitation of offenders. It is time to put a stop to 'miscarriages of justice and ill-treatment of prisoners', and 'the widespread non-enforcement of the law ... which represents a violation of human rights', as well as imprisonment either without trial or else with much-delayed trial. 'The Church... recognizes her prophetic mission towards all those affected by crime and their need for reconciliation, justice and peace'. Prisoners are human persons who, despite their crime, deserve to be treated with respect and dignity. They need our care" (n. 83).

Dear brothers and sisters, human justice and divine justice differ greatly. People are unable of course to apply divine justice. However they must at least look at it, seeking to understand the profound spirit that motivates it so that it may also illumine human justice and thereby prevent the inmate from becoming an outcast, which unfortunately happens all too often. God is the one who proclaims justice forcefully but at the same time heals wounds with the balm of mercy.

The parable in Matthew's Gospel of the labourers, called to work by day in the vineyard (20:1-16), enables us to understand the difference between human and divine justice because it makes the delicate relationship between justice and mercy explicit. The parable describes a farmer who hired labourers to work in his vineyard. But he did so at different times of day so that some of them worked all day and others only for an hour. When the time came to pay their wages the owner of the vineyard elicited amazement and started a discussion among the labourers. The matter concerned the generosity — considered unfair by those present — of the vineyard owner who decided to give the same remuneration to the workers hired in the morning as to those hired in the afternoon. In the human perspective this decision was an authentic form of unfairness, from God's viewpoint an act of kindness, because divine justice gives to each what he is due and includes in addition mercy and forgiveness.

Justice and mercy, justice and charity on which the Church's charity is hinged, are two different realities only for the human person. For we distinguish carefully between a just act and an act of love. For us "just" means "what is due to the other", while "merciful" is what is given out of kindness. One seems to exclude the other. Yet for God it is not like this: justice and charity coincide in him; there is no just action that is not also an act of mercy and pardon, and at the same time, there is no merciful action that is not perfectly just.

How far God's logic is from our own! And how different is his way of acting from ours! The Lord

invites us to understand and observe the the true spirit of the law to give it total fulfilment in love for those in need. "Love... is the fulfilling of the law", St Paul wrote (Rom 13:10). Our justice will be all the more perfect the more motivated it is by love for God and for our brethren.

Dear friends, the detention system revolves around two strong points that are both important: on the one hand the protection of society from possible threats and on the other, the reintegration of those who have erred without trampling on their dignity and without excluding them from social life. Both these aspects are important and aim to avoid creating that "abyss" between the prison situation and the situation conceived by the law which foresees as a fundamental element the educational role of punishment and respect for the rights and dignity of the person. Human life belongs to God alone who donated it and is not left to anyone's mercy, not even that of our own free will! We are called to preserve the precious pearl of our life and that of others.

I know that the overcrowding and the degradation of prisons can make detention even more bitter. I have received various letters from inmates which emphasize this. It is important that institutions encourage an attentive analysis of the situation in jails today, that the structures, the means and the personnel be examined in such a way that inmates never have to serve a "double sentence". Moreover, it is important to promote a development of the prison system which, as well as respecting justice, is increasingly adapted to the needs of the human person also by recourse to punishments alternative to imprisonment or to different forms of detention.

Dear friends, today is the fourth Sunday of Advent. May the Nativity of the Lord, now at hand, rekindle hope and love in your hearts. The birth of the Lord Jesus, which we shall be commemorating in a few days, reminds us of his mission to bring salvation to all men and women, excluding no one.

His salvation is not imposed but reaches us through acts of love, mercy and forgiveness that we ourselves can carry out. The Child of Bethlehem will be happy when all human beings return to God with a renewed heart. Let us ask him in silence and prayer to be all released from the prison of sin, pride and conceit. In fact, if they are to be truly free from evil, anguish and death, each and every person needs to come out of this inner prison. Only the Child who was laid in the manger can give complete liberation to all!

I would like to end by telling you that the Church supports and encourages every effort to guarantee everyone a dignified life. Rest assured that I am close to each one of you, to your families, your children to your young people and to your elderly, and that I carry you all in my heart before God. May the Lord bless you and your future!
