



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
FOR PENITENTIARY DIRECTORS OF EUROPE***

Friday, 26 November 2004

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. I am truly pleased to greet you today when you are taking part in Rome in the Conference of the Penitentiary Directors from the 45 member States of the Council of Europe. Thank you for your welcome visit which gives me the opportunity to become better acquainted with your work and projects. You are dealing with topics that are more timely than ever, concerning the management in Europe of those in custody and of prisons.

I respectfully greet you all. I greet in a special way the Director General of Legal Affairs of the Council of Europe and the Department Head of the Italian Prisons Administration, to whom I express my deep gratitude for their kind words on behalf of all.

2. You are reflecting on how to adapt the norms of European penitentiaries to bring them increasingly into line with the needs of prisoners. There is no doubt that they should always recognize the personal dignity of the prisoner as a subject with rights and duties. In every civilized nation, the safeguard of the inalienable rights of every human being must be a shared concern. Thus, with the commitment of all, laws and norms that counter this must be adjusted, especially when it is a question of the right to life and health, culture, employment, the exercise of freedom of thought and the profession of one's own faith.

Respect for human dignity is a value of European culture that is rooted in Christianity: a universal human value and, as such, susceptible of the broadest consensus. Every State must ensure that full attention be paid in all prisons to fundamental human rights.

3. Measures that are merely repressive or punitive, to which it is normal to have recourse today, prove inadequate for achieving the goal of the genuine rehabilitation of prisoners. Consequently, you must rethink the situation of prisons, as you are doing, regarding their foundations and goals. If the purpose of penitentiaries is not only the custody but also the recovery of their inmates, it will be necessary to abolish physical and moral treatment that is harmful to human dignity and to strive to give a better professional standing to the role of those who work in penal institutions.

4. In this light, the search for alternative forms of punishment other than imprisonment should be encouraged and support given to an authentic rehabilitation of prisoners through programmes of human, professional and spiritual formation.

The useful role of religious ministers has been recognized in this context. They are called to carry out a sensitive and in some respects indispensable task that cannot be reduced to acts of worship alone but often extends to the social needs of prisoners that the prison structure cannot always satisfy.

How can we then fail to note with pleasure the increasing number of institutions and associations for volunteers dedicated to helping prisoners and to their rehabilitation in society?

5. A legitimate concern that some have reasserted is that respect for the human dignity of prisoners should not jeopardize public security. They are therefore insisting on the need to defend citizens, even with those forms of deterrence in conformity with the sentences. However, the necessary enforcement of justice to safeguard citizens and the public order should not detract from the attention due to the rights and rehabilitation of prisoners; on the contrary, these two aspects are integrated with each another. Prevention and repression, detention and re-socialization are complementary interventions.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, may God sustain your efforts to make prison a place of humanity, redemption and hope. I assure you of my prayers, and invoke God's blessing upon those of you present here and upon all those who work in the prisons of Europe, with a particularly affectionate thought for all the prisoners.

**L'Osservatore Romano. Weekly Edition in English n°49 p.7.*

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana