

# REMEMBER ME

A Catholic Approach to Criminal Justice

**Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales**

Department for Social Justice



# Foreword

Bishop Richard Moth, Liaison Bishop for Prisons and Chair of the Department for Social Justice of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales.



**I am very pleased to commend *Remember Me*, the new document on criminal justice by the Department for Social Justice of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales.**

Following on, as it does, from the previous publications of *A Place of Redemption* and *A Journey of Hope*, this new document explores contemporary issues of criminal justice in the light of Catholic social teaching.

Remembering that every person has an innate God-given dignity is a key step on the path to effective criminal justice. The history of criminal justice in England and Wales shows the efforts that have been made in different times to achieve this. At a time of great challenge and opportunity for the criminal justice system, this document presents a timely reminder of the need to remember and accompany all those affected by crime, from the victims and perpetrators of crime to their families and the wider community, and to address the acute and chronic problems undermining our criminal justice system.

While appropriate punishment for crime is important, it is but one element in the journey for the person who has committed crime. The availability of training and support for those serving sentences is vital for creating a sense of hope and new possibilities.

Effective rehabilitation is important not just for those serving sentences but also for the benefit of the wider community. The condition of our prison estate continues to demand attention, for it is very difficult to discover dignity and purpose in conditions that are, in some cases, not fit for purpose.

There is a call, too, for the whole community to remember and accept the opportunities to enable those leaving our prisons to be resettled and reintegrated into society in the hope of finding, perhaps for the first time, a healthy sense of belonging, community and self-esteem. In particular, the value of restorative justice must be recognised, for it can be an effective path to both healing for the victims of crime and rehabilitation for offenders.

The families of those serving prisons sentences are often, in a different way, the victims of crime. Understanding and support – especially for the children affected by the imprisonment of parents and caregivers – must surely be a responsibility for the state and wider society.

There is a need to examine afresh the underlying social conditions that can feed a fertile environment for criminal behaviour. We must be concerned, for example, about the increasing fragility of the family and the growth of gang cultures often linked to drug abuse, and we must seek to ensure that young people have prospects of meaningful work and hope for the future. The greater awareness of the importance of mental health and well-being, which is so welcome in our present times, should assist in addressing these complex factors affecting crime and reoffending.

This document offers clear calls to action for the Catholic community, wider civil society and the UK Government and its criminal justice agencies. Stemming from the foundation of faith and guided by the insights of Catholic social teaching in dialogue with the individual and institutional experiences of criminal justice, it is hoped that these recommendations will assist us all in developing an increasingly just, merciful and effective approach to criminal justice in our country.

+ Richard Moth



**Bishop Richard Moth**

Liaison Bishop for Prisons  
Chair of the Department for Social Justice  
*Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales*

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# Introduction

Reading the signs of the times in criminal justice through the light of Catholic social teaching



**Criminal justice is an urgent and important subject for Catholic social thought and action. Questions of justice and mercy cut to the heart, stretch the mind and move the soul. Can we seek both justice and mercy? How do we strike the right balance between punishment and rehabilitation? How can we love both victim and offender?**

Crime, punishment and rehabilitation are difficult and often distressing human realities. It is imperative for the Catholic Church in England and Wales to remember and accompany all of those affected by the criminal justice process, as we set our sights on the just and merciful restoration of relationships damaged by crime and suffering.

From the choice of punishment to the support of rehabilitation to the embrace of redemption, this document will explore the principles, practical challenges and pastoral opportunities concerning the contemporary criminal justice process in England and Wales, both as they relate to the Church and to wider society.

We are particularly keen to highlight the human dignity of all involved in the criminal justice system and to promote the practice of local community-based solutions to some of the problems affecting our criminal justice processes.



## The signs of the times

Over the past twenty years, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales has published four major papers on criminal justice.<sup>1</sup> During these two decades, the problems and challenges facing our criminal justice system have broadened and deepened. For illustration, a recent briefing from the Prison Reform Trust (February 2024) on the state of our prisons makes for stark reading: "Prisons continue to be places of hopelessness and despair for too many people [...] As long as we have a justice system trapped in survival mode – one that is focused on just getting through the day – prisons are unlikely to become the places that they need to be in order to deliver on their core mission".<sup>2</sup>

Our criminal justice system faces major challenges:

- Around 8.8 million crimes were estimated to have been committed in the year ending March 2024, though only around 1.48 million individuals were caught and prosecuted or given an out-of-court disposal in the same period.<sup>3</sup>
- England and Wales have the highest imprisonment rate in western Europe and the prison population has grown by 93% over the last thirty years, despite the lack of any clear causal relationship between increased imprisonment and reduced crime and reoffending over the same period.<sup>4</sup>
- 33.9% of adults released from prison reoffend within a year of release, increasing to 44.2% of those with more than ten past convictions.<sup>5</sup>
- A high rate of imprisonment has placed enormous pressure on our prisons estate whilst budgets are stretched.<sup>6</sup>
- Too many prisoners are confined to their cells for too long, and rates of self-harm and assault are alarmingly high.<sup>7</sup>

The persistence and prevalence of these problems has led to a need for us to speak again on these matters. We wish to highlight the threat to human dignity across our criminal justice system and herald new opportunities for promoting the common good in our courts, prisons and probation service.

## Principles of Catholic social teaching

Catholic social teaching supplies a body of knowledge and wisdom on our common human condition and shared human community, which can help to inform the reflections and responses of the state, Church and wider society to the complex realities of criminal justice. Made in the image and likeness of God, we have been created for a life of flourishing through being in right relationship with God, others and ourselves. Though we have free will and moral agency, we depend on each other to foster the common good and create environments in which we can thrive both individually and collectively. While we are each capable of great good, we are also capable of great harm and of fracturing our relationships with God, others and ourselves. Ultimately, we are all equally dependent on the grace of God to encourage and enable us to heal and restore our broken relationships, particularly in cases of crime and wrongdoing.

Understanding both the individual and social dimensions of criminal justice, the Church can, through her moral teachings and practical experiences, help contribute to public policy in criminal justice. Her social teaching can assist both policymakers and community members to better understand and address the personal and moral aspects of criminal justice alongside the social, cultural, economic and political dimensions, in the shared pursuit of a deeper and more authentic understanding and practice of justice and mercy in our society.

Our vision of criminal justice is of a justice that is truly restorative. This combines care for victims, punishment of offences and the reform, rehabilitation and redemption of offenders. Catholic social teaching

recognises the centrality of criminal justice to the common good, “the sum of those conditions of the social life whereby men, families and associations more adequately and readily may attain their own perfection”.<sup>8</sup> Our courts, prisons and probation service are integral to the social conditions of our society and their proper functioning is essential to facilitating the betterment of all in society, both materially and relationally.

As with all matters of social justice, the Catholic approach to criminal justice is founded on the “threefold cornerstone of human dignity, solidarity and subsidiarity”.<sup>9</sup> Human dignity is the primary animating principle of Catholic social teaching and is understood as “the intrinsic value of a person created in the image and likeness of God and redeemed by Christ”.<sup>10</sup> Those who are the victims of crime and those who commit crimes have the same human dignity, and both state and society share in the responsibility to uphold their human dignity at every stage of the criminal justice process. Crucially, it is this same human dignity that entails our freedom to choose and pursue a course of action, whether committing crime or embracing the possibility of rehabilitation and redemption, notwithstanding the effects of external conditions on our perspectives and decision-making.

Solidarity is a virtue and a duty, entailing “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all”.<sup>11</sup> Connecting generations and crossing boundaries, the principle of solidarity propels our social action, particularly the preferential option for the poor, which includes the victims of crime and their families as well as those in our prisons and serving on probation.

In particular, we recognise that the perpetrators of crime have all too often been the victims of crime themselves, that not all those who commit crimes are equally culpable, and that not all crimes are equally destructive and damaging to the community.

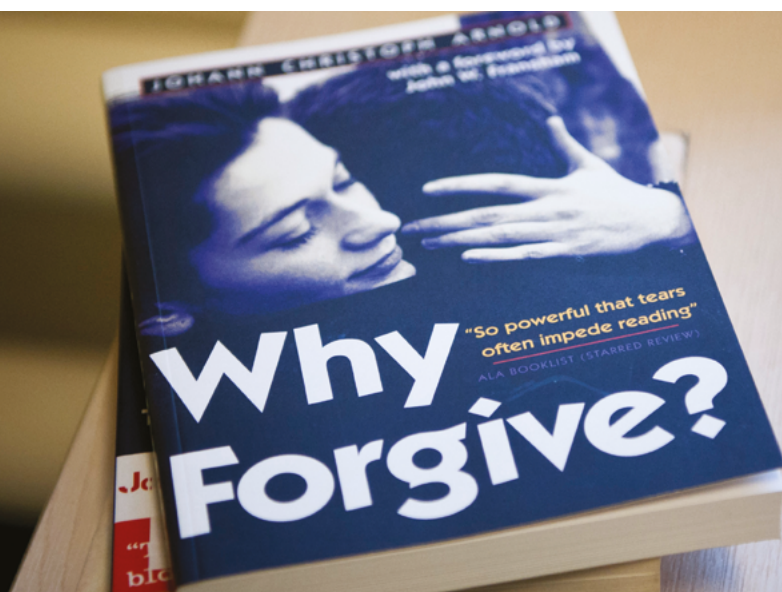
The principle of subsidiarity invites all individuals and institutions in society to take responsibility for promoting the common good, with action being taken at the lowest appropriate level whenever possible. As such, while it is the responsibility of the state to ensure law and order, it is also important for families, charities and local associations to be enabled to support the rehabilitation of offenders in particular ways, providing the love, support and fraternity that is characteristic of these institutions.

**“Justice is properly sought solely out of love of justice itself, out of respect for the victims, as a means of preventing new crimes and protecting the common good [...] Forgiveness is precisely what enables us to pursue justice without falling into a spiral of revenge or the injustice of forgetting”**

*Pope Francis, Fratelli Tutti (2020) 252*

The Church is not, however, simply another service provider in civil society. She is a prophetic voice and vessel for social justice in a truly transformative way. In her understanding of both the beauty and the brokenness of our shared human condition, the Church can, by her words and actions, shine some light into the darkness of the difficult realities of crime and punishment and help to uphold the inalienable human dignity of all involved in our criminal justice system.

To visit those in prison is to visit Christ himself. As Christians, we are called both to remember and to walk alongside the victim, the offender, the families involved, and the wider community affected by the criminal justice process. At the heart of our contribution is a conviction of the compatibility of justice and mercy, both in principle and in practice. As Pope Francis has written: “Justice is properly sought solely out of love of justice itself, out of respect for the victims, as a means of preventing new crimes and protecting the common good [...] Forgiveness is precisely what enables us to pursue justice without falling into a spiral of revenge or the injustice of forgetting”.<sup>12</sup>



# Justice and Mercy

By practising justice and mercy towards each other, we share in the love of God which can redeem even the most challenging circumstances



**The Scriptures resound with calls for justice and for mercy. The same clamour is audible in our society, as we struggle to tackle persistent reoffending, overwhelmed courts, overcrowded prisons, and the challenging social and economic conditions which can often fuel criminal behaviour.**

Catholic social teaching, grounded in Scripture and tradition, promotes a positive relationship between justice and mercy. This has much to offer in our current context.

With victims, we can echo the cries of the Psalmist that God “let the evil of the wicked come to an end [...] [and] establish the righteous” (Psalm 7:9).<sup>13</sup> With offenders, we can repeat the request of St Dismas on his cross next to Christ: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Luke 23:42). With the community, we can trust in the words of Ecclesiastes that “God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work” (Ecclesiastes 3:17).

We understand criminal justice to have three aims: just punishment, rehabilitation and redemption. A process rather than an event, criminal justice must always prioritise care for victims while seeking the reformation and reintegration of offenders into the community.

**We understand criminal justice to have three aims:**

- Just punishment
- Rehabilitation
- Redemption

Justice and mercy come from God Himself and are mutually compatible in together showing the full love of God for humanity. By practising justice and mercy towards each other, although in limited human ways, we share in the same love of God which can transform realities and redeem relationships, even in the most challenging circumstances.

The complementarity of justice and mercy is visible in various forms throughout the Old and New Testament. In the Old Testament, the chosen people of Israel are both justly punished by God for their disobedience and yet repeatedly shown mercy through the renewal of their covenant with Him. The intimate connection between justice and mercy is most clear in the person and teachings of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. For example, the interaction between Christ and the woman caught in adultery shows his balancing of justice and mercy in response to wrongdoing. Rather than stone the woman according to a strict reading of the Law of Moses, Christ instead engages with the woman and exhorts her to change her ways, saying “go, and from now on sin no more.”<sup>14</sup> Christ rebukes the offence and urges the offender to restore her right relationship with the community. This creates an opportunity for both the repentant offender and the wider community to reconcile and reflect the love of God to each other, recognising that both are equally capable of committing offences and both have received the gift of God’s grace to forgive and be forgiven.

Although at times the journey from the Old Testament to the New Testament can be simplistically labelled as a journey from justice to mercy, it really represents a deepening in the human understanding of the dynamic relationship between justice

and mercy, embodied in the life and ministry of Christ, and a more authentic appreciation of justice and mercy as not simply a matter of rules and regulations but a matter of relationships across the community. The co-existence in our own society of the just punishment of offences with compassion, forgiveness and redemption for the offender should reflect the same balance of justice and mercy that humanity has received from God.

This positive-sum game of justice and mercy is powerfully illustrated in Luke’s Gospel account of the so-called Good Thief, St Dismas, who, along with another criminal, was crucified beside Christ on Golgotha outside Jerusalem. Although only a brief account and limited in time and space, the response of St Dismas to his crime, punishment and possibility of redemption effectively encapsulates the full Catholic understanding of criminal justice.

First, St Dismas recognises his offence and the need for just punishment, contrasting it with the innocence of Christ. Rebuking his fellow criminal for his unrepentance, Dismas admits: “we are receiving the due reward of our deeds”.<sup>15</sup>

Secondly, Dismas seeks rehabilitation amid his punishment through the restoration of right relationship. At the hour of his death on the cross, that rehabilitation concerns his relationship with God and comes through his plea: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom”.<sup>16</sup>

Thirdly, Dismas knows the gift of redemption – not, for him, the merciful restoration of his place in the community but rather the promise from Christ of his place in heaven: “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise”.<sup>17</sup> Here we can witness the culmination of the criminal

**“Jesus, remember  
me when you  
come into your  
kingdom” Luke 23:42**

justice process: Dismas has been justly punished, voluntarily rehabilitated and mercifully redeemed in the presence of the community.

The story of St Dismas reveals the heart of Catholic social teaching on criminal justice: mercy and justice are a positive-sum game which, with the contrition and co-operation of the offender, can allow for the restoration of right relationships in society.

Building on the foundations of Scripture, the positive relationship between justice and mercy is a recurrent theme of Catholic social teaching. It was explored in greatest depth by Pope John Paul II in his 1980 papal encyclical *Dives in Misericordia* (literally, ‘Rich in Mercy’). This encyclical showcased the transformative power of mercy to restore human relationships with God, others and oneself to an even greater extent than the more narrow parameters of human justice. Indeed, as Pope John Paul II noted, practice of merciful love is the “essence of the Gospel and Christianity”.<sup>18</sup>

**Practice of merciful  
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*Pope John Paul II, Dives  
in Misericordia (1980) 14*



Titian, *Christ and the Good Thief* (c. 1566)

# Just Punishment

Care for victims and the use of necessary and proportionate punishment for offences are grounded in the common human dignity of victims and offenders

The Central Criminal Court, otherwise known as the Old Bailey, in the City of London



**The issue of punishment provokes profound questions. Can we ever truly have justice on earth? How can we strike a balance between punishing crime and rehabilitating criminals? How can we best care for victims, while also walking alongside those who have committed crimes and may have themselves been victims of crime in the past?**

Through her emphasis on mercy and compassion, is the Catholic Church in her social teaching soft on crime and criminals whilst being very demanding of victims? These questions are ones of both principle and practice, with significant implications for our social action and pastoral care.

The main purpose of just punishment is to restore the personal relationships and social order that has been disrupted by the disorder of crime. The choice of necessary and proportionate punishment is vital for providing justice for the victim, protecting public safety and allowing for the possibility of the rehabilitation and ultimate reintegration of the person who has committed crime into the wider community.

Although the primary concern is seeking justice and securing peace and order, the ultimate goal of punishment is the healing and restoration of relationships across the community, especially by upholding the human dignity of both victim and offender through the use of punishment that is neither too heavy nor too light for the particular circumstance.

## Care for Victims

Care for victims is the first responsibility of criminal justice. With victims, we echo the cries of the Psalmist that God “hear the desire of the afflicted [...] [and] do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed”.<sup>19</sup> As Catholics, we are called by Christ to care for victims in both a practical and relational manner, centred on the inherent human dignity which we all hold in common.

The imperative to attend to the needs of the victims of crime is clear in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. An unnamed man travels down from Jerusalem to Jericho and falls among thieves who “stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead”.<sup>20</sup> Ignored in his distress by a passing priest and Levite, the victim is eventually shown care and compassion by a Samaritan who bandaged his wounds, anointed him with oil and wine and carried him to shelter on horseback. The victim is cared for in a relational rather than transactional manner; the Good Samaritan takes responsibility for the fate of the victim, tending to his wounds at the scene of the crime, transporting him to an inn, and then enlisting the help of the innkeeper to take care of the recovering victim at his expense. The care provided to the victim is practical: medical aid, shelter and financial assistance. Compassion is not simply a mental state but a call to action. More deeply, the Parable of the Good Samaritan touches on the theological significance of care for victims as an example of the Great Commandment from Christ to love our neighbour as ourselves.

Care for victims must be an essential pillar of our criminal justice process. Central to care for victims is witnessing their suffering, acknowledging their pain and listening and attending to their practical needs, throughout the criminal justice system, civil society and our parishes.

Eugène Delacroix, *The Good Samaritan* (1849)



## Caring for Victims in the Criminal Justice System in England and Wales

Listening to the voices of victims in the criminal justice process is a practical means of ensuring that our system is informed by those it intends to serve. In *A Journey of Hope* (2018), the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales emphasised that it is "essential that victims are involved in the process of building a more humane criminal justice system", particularly in any proposed reform of sentencing practices.<sup>21</sup>

In this vein, the Catholic Bishops' Conference recently endorsed provisions in the *Victims and Prisoners Act 2024*, particularly the placement of the overarching principles of the Victims' Code in primary legislation.<sup>22</sup> Such principles seek to vindicate the rights of victims through the provision of information to help them understand the often obscure criminal justice process, access to support services, and the opportunity to express their views on the criminal justice process, including to challenge decisions which have a direct impact on them.<sup>23</sup>

These measures recognise the rights of victims to transparency, accountability and appeal within the criminal justice process. Care for victims also requires their effective participation in the justice system so that they do not feel as if they are simply passive observers.

Practical support for victims of crime is critical. Such support has the benefit of encouraging hidden victims of crime to come forward and seek justice. This is particularly the case for victims of domestic abuse and sexual assault where reporting of crime seems to significantly underestimate the reality of the problem. We support the recommendations from Victim Support that the quantity and

quality of support services for victims of crime, including specialist services, be improved across England and Wales; that the Government and other bodies adopt a holistic approach to addressing violence against women and girls; and that the reporting process for victims of antisocial behaviour is rendered more timely, transparent and effective so as to resolve the social scourge of low-level criminality that undermines trust, safety and well-being in our communities.<sup>24</sup>

Proper care for victims and proper treatment of prisoners can bring mutual benefit to the criminal justice process. Many offenders have themselves been victims of crime, and the line between victim and offender can often be blurry in reality. For instance, the latest evidence from the Prison Reform Trust on the social characteristics of adult prisoners shows that 29% of adult prisoners experienced abuse as a child, including 53% of women prisoners (compared with 20% of the general population); 41% of adult prisoners observed violence in the home as a child (compared with 14% of the general population); and 46% of women prisoners had attempted suicide at some point (compared with 6% of the general population).<sup>25</sup>

Although the experience of abuse and trauma is never an excuse for criminal behaviour, the correlation between such experiences and subsequent criminality indicates the importance of caring for victims as critical both to their welfare and to the future wellbeing of the wider community. In the light of the Christian understanding of our common human nature, we can see the God-given human dignity of both victims and offenders and recognise that we are all equally loved by God and equally capable of both wrongdoing and reconciliation.

## Caring for Victims and the Role of Civil Society

There is a crucial, and often overlooked, role for civil society in providing for the needs of those who suffer from crime.

Although crime rates have generally declined over the last decade, the sheer scale of crime and antisocial behaviour in our society remains staggering. Many people who are the victims of crime, and many more who suffer from antisocial behaviour, do not see justice being done.<sup>26</sup> Only 8% of victims report that they feel confident that they will receive justice in the event of reporting a crime.<sup>27</sup> It is, therefore, more important than ever that wider society supports victims in their struggle for justice, even if the offences against them are never prosecuted.

The Catholic Church and related organisations have a particularly important role in caring for victims outside the structures of the criminal justice system. The pastoral imperative to care for victims echoes throughout the publications of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, which have called for greater awareness of the needs of victims of crime at parish

level and for the Church and other organisations to “accompany victims of crime by helping them to discover that it is ultimately forgiveness and not retribution that brings healing”.<sup>28</sup>

There is a clear opportunity for the Catholic Church in England and Wales to provide for the spiritual, psychological and physical needs of victims. The way in which we do this should be deepened by our understanding of the reality of suffering and enriched by our hope in the redemption of any person or situation through human co-operation with the grace of God.

In our parishes and communities, such activities are intended to accept and accompany victims in a hopeful, healing journey. Two notable examples are Grief to Grace and Safe in Faith. Grief to Grace is a registered Catholic charity which provides specialised programmes of integrated spiritual and psychological healing for victims of sexual, physical, emotional or spiritual abuse.<sup>29</sup> Safe in Faith, a project of the Caritas Westminster agency, provides survivors of domestic abuse, sexual violence and exploitation with faith-based support tailored to their experiences as believers.<sup>30</sup>



## Restoration of Order

The use of just punishment seeks to restore the personal and social order disrupted by crime. Additionally, it provides an opportunity for a willing offender to be rehabilitated and restored to right relationship with the community. As set out in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church recognises the legitimate legal authority and moral duty of the state to protect the common good through the inflicting of “punishment proportionate to the gravity of the offence”.<sup>31</sup> Punishment has “the primary aim of redressing the disorder introduced by the offence” in “defending public order and protecting people’s safety”.<sup>32</sup> In addition, punishment can serve the purpose of rehabilitation when “willingly accepted by the guilty party”.<sup>33</sup> The late Pope John Paul II summarised the twofold function of public authority as being to “redress the violation of personal and social rights by imposing on the offender an adequate punishment for the crime, as a condition for the offender to regain the exercise of his or her freedom”.<sup>34</sup>

The wounds of crime can muster a maelstrom of disturbing emotions and distressing thoughts. In seeking both ends of punishment and rehabilitation, we must tread a careful line so as neither to undermine the dignity of the offender nor underestimate the gravity of their offence. In his papal encyclical on fraternity, *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis grapples with the personal, emotional and social dimensions of justice and argues that punishment, properly applied, is central to the protection of the dignity of both victim and offender. It is entirely just, Pope Francis argues, for those who suffer injustice to “defend strenuously their own rights and those of their family” in “demanding justice and ensuring that this person – or anyone else – will not harm me, or others, again”.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, such demands are essential to “preserve the dignity they have received as a loving gift from God”.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, Pope Francis emphasises that “loving an oppressor does not mean allowing him to keep oppressing us, or letting him think that what he does is acceptable”, but rather entails “seeking ways to make him cease his oppression”.<sup>37</sup> In this sense, punishment prevents oppressors from “trampling on their own dignity and that of others” through their wrongdoing.<sup>38</sup>

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acceptable”**

*Pope Francis, Fratelli Tutti  
(2020) 241*



## The Purposes of Punishment

Punishment can be understood to have four primary purposes:

1. **Retribution:** *restoring social order through the punishment of crime in a proportionate way.*
2. **Restraint:** *protecting the community from harm by preventing offenders from committing further crimes.*
3. **Deterrence:** *disincentivising further crime and reoffending.*
4. **Reform:** *facilitating the rehabilitation of offenders for their own personal good and the common good.*

A Catholic perspective on criminal justice requires that a balance between these aims is struck through a recognition of the inherent value of both punishment and rehabilitation. The punishment of crime and rehabilitation of offenders are viewed as inherently good activities insofar as they intentionally seek to preserve the common good, rather than simply because they work in cutting crime and reducing re-offending.

In practice, a Catholic approach to sentencing is predicated on the twin principles of desert and proportionality.

The principle of desert establishes that individuals are free and active moral agents who are capable of committing crimes and responsible for the consequences of their actions, including the acceptance of proportionate punishment. The principle of proportionality asserts that a particular crime merits a particular punishment, rather than anything lighter or heavier.

These guiding principles of desert and proportionality are central to the Catholic understanding of punishment as a necessary and proportionate pillar of our criminal justice process.

## Punishment within the Criminal Justice System in England and Wales

There are pressing problems in the administration of justice in our country. As noted above, England and Wales have the highest imprisonment rate in western Europe, and the prison population has grown by 93% in the past thirty years, despite the lack of any clear causal connection between increased imprisonment and decreased crime rates.<sup>39</sup> The average prison sentence for indictable offences is now 62.4 months, nearly 24 months longer than in 2010.<sup>40</sup> One in six of the current prison population across England and Wales are currently serving indeterminate sentences, including nearly three thousand people still serving Imprisonment for Public Protection (IPP) custodial sentences despite their abolition in 2012.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, there remains a preference for short-term prison sentences over community sentences, despite the greater effectiveness of the latter in reducing reoffending.<sup>42</sup>

The problem of sentence inflation in our judicial system is inseparable from the chronic overcrowding and connected crises afflicting our prisons estate. It vindicates the warning of Pope John Paul II that, at present, “in some cases, detention seems to create more problems than it solves”.<sup>43</sup> While custodial sentences are necessary in numerous cases, their overuse has had negative unintended consequences, such as the destructive impact on prisoners’ families.

Pope Francis has spoken of the need for jurists to follow the guiding principles of caution in punishment (*cautela in poenam*) and last resort (*ultima ratio*) in the sentencing of offenders.<sup>44</sup> Specifically, Pope Francis declared that the “mission of jurists cannot be other than that of limiting and containing these tendencies [...] in times when many judges and employees in the criminal justice system must perform their work under the pressure of the mass media, of certain unscrupulous politicians and of the vengeful trend which permeates society”.<sup>45</sup> There is a clear calling on those involved in our courts, judiciary and politics to resist harmful social and cultural impulses towards penal populism when attempting to strike a delicate balance between security and dignity in sentencing. It is important for Christians, and all people of goodwill, to help our politicians make better choices when it comes to criminal justice policy.

Given the practical problems presented by more and longer custodial sentences for effective punishment and rehabilitation, it is imperative that innovative solutions are sought. This should include the greater use of community-based sentences, especially for offenders who no longer present a threat to society and may have certain complex needs. For example, the combination of growing prison populations and lengthening sentences, including for historic crimes, has produced an ageing demographic of prisoners facing problems such as dementia. Prisoners over the age of 50 are one of the fastest-growing demographics in our prisons and, in many cases, may be more effectively punished and rehabilitated in the community for some or all of their sentence.<sup>46</sup> Such sentencing

alternatives could entail an effective combination of freedom and constraint, such as the proposal from the Centre for Social Justice for Intensive Control and Rehabilitation Orders.<sup>47</sup> Drawing on technological advances, this approach would restrict the liberty of the offender through the use of electronic monitoring and the setting of curfews, while allowing for healthy and rehabilitative involvement in family and community life as appropriate to the particular situation.<sup>48</sup>

Balanced and thoughtful alternatives to excessive custodial sentencing are far better than reacting to urgent problems by building more prison capacity, rushing changes in sentencing guidelines to try to reduce the number of people in prison, or releasing prisoners at increasingly early stages without proper support. Indeed, releasing more prisoners at an earlier stage simply shifts the pressure from prisons to an already overstretched probation service. Employing such emergency tactics may be a necessary short-term measure to avert worse circumstances of overrun prisons and clogged courts, but it only highlights the need for longer-term thinking about the deeper problems affecting the criminal justice system.

Although in need of reform, it should be noted that custodial sentences amounted for only around 10% of all sentences last year, while fines and compensation orders amounted for around 80% of all sentences.<sup>49</sup> Fines and compensation orders for offenders already living in poverty can have counterproductive effects. Research has revealed that the use of fines, particularly for property crimes, is positively correlated with an increase in reconviction rates, suggesting that the levying of fines in

these cases may actually influence an offender to commit additional crimes, potentially to compensate for their financial losses.<sup>50</sup> In contrast, the use of community sentences for property crimes is positively related to reduced reconviction rates, indicating it works better as an alternative to fines in cases of property crimes.<sup>51</sup> Given many offenders already live in poverty, we would recommend that the widespread use of fines and compensation orders be reconsidered, with more effective community sentences being used as an alternative.



The Royal Courts of Justice on the Strand in the City of Westminster

## The administration of justice

Crimes should be met with predictable, swift and appropriate consequences. However, there is real concern over the physical and professional capacity of our courts to reliably and effectively dispense justice for the benefit of victims, defendants and families. The dilapidated state of many of our court buildings, some of which predate the Victorian era, as well as shortfalls in staffing have presented practical challenges to the efficient running of trials.

Although multiple governments have committed to supporting those working in our courts and prisons, these persistent problems have undermined the morale and well-being of court and prison staff, which has led to a steady loss of expertise and experience. For instance, there has been a 9.8% decline in the number of full-time criminal barristers between 2017-18 and 2021-22 and more than a 50% decrease in the number of magistrates between 2010-11 and 2021-22.<sup>52</sup> Meanwhile, criminal legal aid spending has declined by 41% since 2011-12.<sup>53</sup> Overall, the shortcomings in our courts system can effectively undermine the right to a fair trial, thereby undermining the process of punishment and rehabilitation which is central to delivering justice for both victims and defendants.

For too many victims, defendants and families, justice delayed has been justice denied. Following the disruption of the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent barrister strike in 2022, delays in the completion of criminal cases in the Crown Court have reached a record high. The latest statistics show a backlog of 67,573 cases by the end of December 2023, representing an 8% increase on the previous year.<sup>54</sup> Nearly 30% of these cases have been outstanding for a year or more, of which 10% have been

left incomplete for two years or more.<sup>55</sup>

Moreover, court delays have contributed to a 9% annual increase in the size of the prison population being held on remand, either awaiting trial or awaiting sentencing, which has led to a fifty-year record high of 17,662 prisoners on remand.<sup>56</sup> Given that swiftness of judgement is a central element of criminal justice for all involved, such delays give serious cause for concern.

A more effective criminal justice system would not necessarily need more resources overall. A system which reduced offending would, in the long term, save money as well as bring many benefits to society. Our current overuse of custodial sentencing is expensive: the average cost of a prison place in England and Wales is £51,724.<sup>57</sup> Given that the proven reoffending rate for adult offenders leaving custody is 37.6% and that the latest estimate for the annual total economic and social cost of reoffending stood at a staggering £18.1 billion, prison sentences provide particularly poor value for money at present.<sup>58</sup> Savings in sentencing and reoffending could then be partly diverted to fund the better administration of our courts.

## Concluding remarks

The Catholic understanding of just punishment hopes for the healing and restoration of personal lives and the social fabric. The use of necessary and proportionate punishment, allied with care for the material and relational needs of victims, are grounded in the common human dignity of both victims and offenders. Both Government and wider society have critical parts to play in caring for victims and ensuring that our sentencing practices and court procedures both honour the human dignity of all involved and prudently manage the administration of criminal justice.

# Recommendations

## *Catholic Church in England and Wales*

- The Catholic Church in England and Wales will continue to promote the work of groups supporting victims, such as Grief to Grace and Safe in Faith, and will encourage the replication of such activities throughout our dioceses and parishes.
- Catholic bishops and priests will provide spiritual and pastoral accompaniment in an appropriate manner to those who have been the victims of crime.
- Lay Catholics should endeavour to pray for the healing of those who have suffered from the wounds of crime and support such victims in their communities through material and relational means, when appropriate.
- The Catholic Church in England and Wales will encourage lay Catholics to consider legal vocations, including the voluntary role of a magistrate.

## *UK Government and its criminal justice agencies*

- The Government should improve support services for victims of crime, including assistance from independent specialist services whenever necessary.
- The Government and its criminal justice agencies should adopt a holistic approach


to addressing violence against women and girls in our society, including the reliable provision of specialist victims' services.

- The Government and its criminal justice agencies should improve the reporting process for victims of antisocial behaviour and increase public trust in the possibility of punishing and reducing such criminality.
- The Government and its criminal justice agencies should urgently address the persistent problem of prisoners serving indeterminate sentences.
- The Government should introduce a statutory presumption on courts avoiding the issuing of short custodial sentences unless as a last resort, while ensuring the probation service is sufficiently resourced to manage the increased workload.
- The Government and Sentencing Council should strongly consider the greater use of community sentences, especially for non-violent offences and for older offenders. This may include the expanded use of the Home Detention Curfew scheme and the introduction of an Intensive Control and Rehabilitation Order.
- The Government should develop a new strategy for the effective punishment and rehabilitation of older prisoners.



# Rehabilitation

The importance of humane prison conditions for fostering the reform of those who have committed crimes cannot be overstated

A photograph of a person sitting on a bed in a prison cell, looking out a window. The person is wearing a grey sweater and is seen from behind. The room is sparsely furnished with a wooden cabinet and a television on a shelf in the background.

**Of central importance to Catholic social teaching is the recognition and promotion of the innate dignity of every person.**

Any sentencing regime must seek to strike an effective balance between preserving social order, punishing crime and upholding the dignity of prisoners in order to meet the requirement of punishment and maintain the possibility of redemption. As Pope John Paul II stated: “The nature and application of penal sanctions must be such as to guarantee the rightly invoked security of society, but without attacking the dignity of man, beloved of God and called to redeem himself if guilty. The sentence must not shatter this hope of redemption”.<sup>59</sup> The relationship between security and dignity is central to the design of effective penal policy, from sentencing to the maintenance of dignified prison conditions, and is the guiding principle for our understanding of the practical and pastoral opportunities and challenges facing the practice of rehabilitation in England and Wales.

Successful rehabilitation requires recognition of both the moral agency of those who have committed offences and the severe social circumstances which might well reduce culpability. As previously noted by the Catholic Bishops’ Conference in *A Journey of Hope* (2018), “while in many cases culpability for crime is reduced by a variety of complex factors such as poverty, family breakdown and mental health problems, some people make a choice to continue committing crime and do not make the most of opportunities for rehabilitation”.<sup>60</sup> Crime is both a personal and structural problem and successful rehabilitation requires both personal and structural solutions.

**“The nature and application of penal sanctions must be such as to guarantee the rightly invoked security of society, but without attacking the dignity of man, beloved of God and called to redeem himself if guilty. The sentence must not shatter this hope of redemption”**

*Pope John Paul II, Address to the National Association of Magistrates on Contemporary Role of the Judiciary (2000) 6*



## Poor prison conditions

The prevalence and persistence of poor prison conditions throughout England and Wales represents a major threat to the effective rehabilitation of those serving sentences across the prison estate. Both Pope John Paul II and Pope Francis have highlighted the pervasive danger posed by dehumanising prison conditions to an effective rehabilitation process. In his *Message for the Jubilee in Prisons* (2000), Pope John Paul II lamented that “prisons can become places of violence resembling the places from which the inmates not infrequently come [...] [which] nullifies any attempt to educate through imprisonment”.<sup>61</sup> Pope Francis has called on “Christians and people of good will” to “work for the improvement of prison conditions, out of respect for the human dignity of persons deprived of their freedom”.<sup>62</sup> Poor prison conditions throughout England and Wales manifest in four particular ways: overcrowding, lack of safety, mistreatment of prisoners and lack of purposeful activity.

First, and for reasons already outlined, a high rate of imprisonment has placed enormous pressure on the resources of our prison system. More than three in every five prisons across England and Wales are overcrowded.<sup>63</sup> Although the previous UK Government pledged to create 20,000 new prison places by next year, including through the construction of six new prisons, there would still be a shortfall of 2,300 prison places by March 2025 based on projected prison population growth.<sup>64</sup> The scale of the problem of prison incapacity has been partly disguised by delays in processing court cases. Successive governments have been aware of the pressures on prison space and have failed to act in time through creating new spaces, maintaining existing spaces and reducing demand through sentencing reform.

The stark consequences of overcrowding have previously been raised by the HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, Charlie Taylor, as meaning “more deprivation, squalor and the risk of further violence”.<sup>65</sup> Previous Government proposals to explore the possibility of renting space in overseas prisons in response to the shortfall in prison capacity were particularly concerning.<sup>66</sup> Such measures would be likely to damage rehabilitation efforts, not least by separating prisoners from supportive family ties.

Secondly, the lack of safety in prisons across England and Wales presents serious barriers to rehabilitation. The latest HM Chief Inspector of Prisons’ Annual Report (2023–24) found insufficient levels of safety on their visits to nearly 30% of men’s and women’s prisons and 75% of young offender institutions.<sup>67</sup> High rates of self-harm are a major problem: there were 876 incidents per 1,000

prisoners in the year to June 2023.<sup>68</sup> The number of self-harm incidents among male prisoners increased by 26% between June 2023 and June 2024, with more than a twofold increase in the past decade, while the number of self-harm incidents among female prisoners increased by 3% in the same period.<sup>69</sup> Rates of assaults in prison similarly remain concerningly high, although the pandemic-related physical restrictions did have a dampening effect. The rate of assaults in both male and female prison establishments have reached record highs: the rate of assaults in male prisons increased by 18% between June 2023 and June 2024 while the rate of assaults in female prisons rose by 16% in the same period.<sup>70</sup> Such violence creates unstable and fearful environments for both prisoners and prison staff, upsetting their relationships and undermining the peace and order needed to support and sustain the rehabilitation of offenders. The expectation and experience of unsafe prison conditions has created a vicious cycle in which purposeful activities that might release tension have been stopped, leading to further frustration.

Thirdly, the mistreatment of prisoners is also a cause of concern. The HM Chief Inspector of Prisons found that levels of respectful treatment were below expected standards in around 30% of prisons visited in the course of their most recent Annual Report (2023–24).<sup>71</sup> Particular concern has been expressed about the practice of double occupancy of single cells, leading to a lack of privacy, space and sanitation.<sup>72</sup> Significant numbers of prisoners have reported spending at least 22 hours a day in their cells (42% of male prisoners and 36% of female prisoners), despite the decline in Covid-19-related concerns.<sup>73</sup> Such lack of time and space for prisoners fuels frustration and resentment towards prison staff and fosters an atmosphere of mutual fear and distrust rather than encouragement and empowerment.

The mistreatment of prisoners is connected to a lack of resources within HM Prisons and Probation Service. In spite of recent increased investment, the HMPPS resource budget remains 8% lower in real terms than in 2010–11, while the use of expensive custodial sentences continues to grow.<sup>74</sup> Difficulties in recruiting and retaining suitable prison staff have been particularly pronounced in recent times. Despite a drive in recruitment, there remain almost 5% fewer prison officers than in 2010.<sup>75</sup> Between 2010 and 2024, the proportion of prison officers with ten years or more experience declined from 56% to 25%, while the number of officers with less than three years' experience increased from 13% to 42%.<sup>76</sup> The decline in both the number and the experience of prison officers presents serious challenges to the proper running



of prisons, from responding to the urgent problems of violence to facilitating purposeful activity. The lack of involvement of prison governors in the recruitment of new staff has been cited as a significant and preventable problem.<sup>77</sup> Given the strength of research suggesting that low ratios and positive relationships between prisoners and prison staff are a key source of rehabilitation, particularly in their dignified treatment of those in prison, it is vital that these declines be arrested as soon as possible.<sup>78</sup>

Lastly, the poverty of conditions and resources within our prisons system not only creates conditions of indignity but offers obstacles to the fruitful use of time within prison for rehabilitative purposes. The latest Annual Report (2023–24) by the HM Chief Inspector of Prisons revealed ratings for purposeful activity, such as education, work and other rehabilitative activities within prison, remain concerningly low across the prison estate.<sup>79</sup> Despite the retreat of the pandemic, access to such activities remains sporadic and too many prisoners remain locked in their cells for too long with too little access to too few purposeful activities. For example, 54% of prisons were judged by Ofsted in 2022–23 to have made insufficient progress in providing opportunities for education, skills and work following the lifting of pandemic-related restrictions.<sup>80</sup> Given the evidence that engagement with education in prison can significantly reduce the likelihood of re-offending, the stubbornly slow restoration of such resources is deeply concerning.<sup>81</sup> Amid challenging prison conditions, such activities are crucial to restoring a sense of personal dignity, particularly for those prisoners serving long sentences.

Although many of the problems in our prisons can be partly attributed to a lack of HMPPS funding, those in charge of leading our prisons still have choices to make in ensuring both security and dignity in prison conditions. The reticence of some prison authorities to release prisoners from their cells for purposeful activities has been highlighted by the HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, who noted that “leaders’ focus on safety was not always sufficiently balanced with the need to rehabilitate prisoners”.<sup>82</sup>

It is imperative that our prison leaders are supported and challenged to have a clear vision and strategy for rehabilitation. While additional funding in both our courts and prisons may well grease the wheels of the criminal justice system, the direction and driving force relies on the competence and courage of prison leaders. Civil society and faith groups can play critical parts in the rehabilitation process. However, their participation needs to be facilitated by those in positions of responsibility across our prisons, not restricted by a narrow focus on security at the expense of rehabilitation.

## Centrality of human dignity to the rehabilitation of offenders

The centrality of human dignity to the rehabilitative journey cannot be underestimated and yet faces a number of challenges. A lack of understanding and ability to meet the complex physical and psychological needs of different prisoners can often contribute to prison becoming an education in vice rather than virtue and an experience of despair rather than hope. As highlighted by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, “the conditions under which prisoners serve their time do not always foster respect for their dignity; and often, prisons become places where new crimes are committed.”<sup>83</sup>

Failures in rehabilitation can be most strikingly seen in reoffending rates. Although notoriously difficult to measure, the latest statistics suggest that 26.1% of adult offenders reoffend within a year of release, rising sharply to 56.6% for adults released from custodial sentences of less than twelve months and 59.6% for adults released from custodial sentences of less than six months.<sup>84</sup> It seems clear that the processes of our courts and conditions of our prisons are falling far short of the necessary standards of punishment and rehabilitation, resulting in a vicious cycle of crime, custody and reoffending.

This is particularly clear in the case of women prisoners. As of 30th September 2024, women represented 4% of the total prison population, yet a series of inquiries and reports have demonstrated that the use of custodial sentences is rarely necessary, appropriate or proportionate.<sup>85</sup> Even though most women sentenced to prison have committed a non-violent offence, the use of community sentences

for women has declined by two-thirds in the past decade.<sup>86</sup>

**“[T]he conditions under which prisoners serve their time do not always foster respect for their dignity; and often, prisons become places where new crimes are committed”**

*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church (2006) 403*

Prison can be a particularly brutal experience for women prisoners: a significant majority (82%) of women prisoners reported mental health problems in the latest statistics, in contrast with just over half of male prisoners (59%), while rates of self-harm among female prisoners are at a record high.<sup>87</sup> The serving of a custodial sentence seems to do little to rehabilitate female offenders in such cases; less than half of women leaving prison between April 2023 and March 2024 were known to have settled accommodation and the latest statistics show a reoffending rate for female offenders of 21.9%.<sup>88</sup> As we stated in *A Journey of Hope* (2018): “Many vulnerable women are inappropriately serving a custodial sentence – the Government should widen the availability of non-custodial sentences for women and increase the level of resources for women’s specialist services”.<sup>89</sup>

For too long, prisons have been inappropriately used to house those

suffering from severe mental health problems. The designation of prisons as ‘places of safety’ for those suffering a clinical mental health crisis when secure hospital beds are unavailable has led to severely mentally unwell people languishing in prison cells without proper treatment. For example, investigations have found that nearly a quarter of transfers from prison to hospitals took longer than the recommended 28-day period.<sup>90</sup> We support Government commitments to removing prisons as places of safety under mental health legislation and ensuring that people suffering severe mental health problems are treated in the most appropriate setting.<sup>91</sup> However, we would urge careful planning so that enough space for these prison transfers can be made available in suitable secure and community-based settings.

The decline in the capacity of the Probation Service to provide adequate information on the needs of offenders provides a further challenge. According to HM Inspectorate of Probation, Probation Delivery Units across England and Wales face significant problems with staffing and workload leading to a negative impact on the quality of the risk assessment and management of offenders and subsequent difficulties in reducing reoffending.<sup>92</sup> A sharp decline in the quantity and quality of pre-sentence reports conducted by probation staff over the past decade has been strongly linked to a sharp fall in the use of community sentences over the same period.<sup>93</sup> Problems for the probation system appear to foster further challenges for the courts and prisons systems, not least in contributing to further prison overcrowding and inappropriate sentencing. This fuels a vicious cycle of senseless sentencing and ruptured rehabilitation, all of which is also very inefficient from the perspective of the use of resources. Although the recent Government commitment to introduce a thousand new Trainee Probation Officers by the end of March 2025 is welcome, the system is set to remain strained, especially alongside a greater emphasis on community sentencing.<sup>94</sup>



## Rehabilitation and Civil Society

Rehabilitation of offenders, especially those who have committed the most upsetting and awful crimes, can be a delicate and difficult matter for the community. As highlighted in *A Place of Redemption* (2004): “All of us hold ambivalent or even contradictory views on prison. We know that prison is destructive, and yet we want it to reflect our outrage at the seriousness of certain crimes”.<sup>95</sup>

The public feels deeply ambivalent towards punishment and rehabilitation. On the one hand, 64% of the public believe sentencing in general to be too lenient.<sup>96</sup> On the other hand, only 7% of the public believe that putting more people in prison is an effective solution to the problem of crime, while 41% believe that better parenting and 33% believe that better rehabilitation are more effective responses.<sup>97</sup> Given the emotional and practical complexity of crime and rehabilitation, it is perhaps not surprising that the public simultaneously sees the limitations of prison and yet demands longer sentences. It is critical that civil society is supported and challenged to understand the reality of sentencing and the importance of rehabilitation, both for the good of the offender and the wider community.

**“All of us hold ambivalent or even contradictory views on prison. We know that prison is destructive, and yet we want it to reflect our outrage at the seriousness of certain crimes”**

*Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales, A Place of Redemption (2004) 58*

Post-prison employment can play a critical role in the rehabilitation of offenders. As well as providing ex-offenders with an income, it provides a sense of purpose, source of self-esteem and an opportunity to contribute to the common good once more. While having a criminal conviction can often build a barrier to finding a job, companies such as Timpson, Pret A Manger, Cook and Tesco provide opportunities for ex-offenders to seek employment and thereby grow in their personal and professional lives. For example, approximately 10% of the Timpson workforce have criminal convictions.<sup>98</sup>

Indeed, improvements in the rate of post-prison employment have been a ray of light in the criminal justice system in England and Wales over the past few years. Employment Advisory Boards, designed to better connect business and prison, have been successfully established across all 92 resettlement prisons in England and Wales.<sup>99</sup> Since September 2022, prisoners in open prisons who are just a few months away from release can participate in apprenticeship programmes with a direct link to work after prison.<sup>100</sup> Notably, the number of ex-offenders in employment six months after release rose from 26% to 29% over the year ending March 2024.<sup>101</sup> Of course, this means that there remain almost three-quarters of ex-offenders without employment six months after release. Given that a major Government study has shown that employment can have a significant impact in reducing reoffending rates, it is imperative that more measures are taken to support and incentivise

prison leavers to enter and remain in employment after release.<sup>102</sup> This includes ensuring that prisoners can achieve necessary vocational qualifications and reallocating funding to community organisations supporting post-prison employment.<sup>103</sup>

Although education and employment are effective avenues out of crime for many in our community, they are far from a panacea. Many of those who commit crimes face personal and relational difficulties which can both hinder employment opportunities and undermine the return to right relationships with their family and society more generally. Given this reality, there is a crucial role to be played by family, charities and voluntary associations in the rehabilitation of offenders.

Much important work is undertaken to promote positive connections between prisoners and their families and loved ones. Substantial research has shown that prisoners' families are crucial figures in rehabilitation and can often be hidden victims of the criminal justice process. By its nature, this work has a low profile and can often be confidential, and we would like to celebrate the contribution that so many people make to rehabilitating offenders in various ways.

Ministry of Justice research has revealed that those who did not receive family visits while in prison were 39% more likely to reoffend after release than those who had been visited by their families.<sup>104</sup> The reports on prison reform produced by Lord Farmer for the Ministry of Justice in 2017 and 2019 underlined the importance of positive familial relationships in the rehabilitation process, from personal communication on sensitive issues such as bullying and medication to effective interventions in addressing problems of addiction.<sup>105</sup> When we know that settled accommodation is critical for successful rehabilitation and that fewer than half of people released from prison had access to settled accommodation upon release in the latest statistics, the importance of supporting strong and healthy relationships between prisoners and their families is crucial.<sup>106</sup>

Tremendous work in this area has been carried out by the Prison Advice and Care Trust (Pact), the national Catholic prisons charity, as well as a wide range of charities and support groups. Working in 68 prisons, Pact is the largest national provider of services for prisoners and their families across England and Wales, including prison visits and a prisoners' families helpline.<sup>107</sup> Central to the approach of Pact is the vision of criminal justice as a matter of public health and the importance of involving family members in caring for the health and well-being of those in prison, particularly in cases of complex needs where the knowledge and experience of family members can be especially valuable.<sup>108</sup>





Credit: Andy Aitchison Photography

## Government and civil society working together

The nature of the criminal justice system is such that its administration has to be a core responsibility of government. However, our ambition for offenders to be rehabilitated within society also requires substantial involvement from civil society, charities and faith groups. There must therefore be co-operation between central and local government, probation services and prison authorities, and civil society, charity and faith groups.

The work of Pact is a shining example of the Catholic social teaching principle of subsidiarity. It enables many people to respond at a local level to the call from Christ to promote human dignity and the common good by working with offenders and their families. We would encourage the Government to increase investment in these vital and under-supported services.

We share the concern expressed by the Church of England, Pact and other organisations on the lack of understanding of and support for children who have a parent in prison.<sup>109</sup> The latest estimates indicate that around 193,000 children have a parent in prison and that 55% of female prisoners and 53% of male prisoners have children under the age of 18.<sup>110</sup> However, many children fall between the gaps of the criminal justice system and fail to receive the support they need. We urge Government to ensure that reliable and regular support for children of prisoners is treated as a high priority.

More broadly, we would recommend that Government and criminal justice agencies consider other ways in which the knowledge and care of local communities can be better integrated in the criminal justice process. For example, the greater use of Category D 'open' prisons to provide a staged release

process for prisoners coming towards the end of long-term sentences can be beneficial. Open prisons allow prisoners to prepare for their resettlement through various activities while on day release, as well as for prisons to better assess whether such offenders have been sufficiently rehabilitated to allow for their release back into the community. Although open prisons have been found to have generally the best outcomes for rehabilitation and resettlement, there remain many free places left unfilled.<sup>111</sup>

Given that such prisons are significant both for the resettlement of offenders and for ensuring public protection through more extensive risk assessment, it seems vital that Government and criminal justice agencies seek to improve public understanding of the benefits of such arrangements and empower these communities to play an active part in the resettlement of offenders.

### Concluding remarks

Understandably, there can often be a lack of public concern with the deterioration of prison conditions and opposition to spending scarce public funds on prisoner welfare. However, we all have a stake in both the punishment and rehabilitation of offenders, from cutting crime and reducing reoffending to breaking cycles of trauma and abuse. The importance of humane prison conditions for fostering the interior reform of offenders cannot be overstated as a serious matter of social justice. Respect for human dignity must shape both the means and ends of the criminal justice system. As Pope Francis has said: “Respect for human dignity must serve not only to limit arbitrariness and the excesses of the agents of the State, but act as a guiding criterion for the prosecution and punishment of those actions which represent the most serious attacks against the dignity and integrity of the human person”.<sup>112</sup>



# Recommendations

## *Catholic Church in England and Wales*

- We commend the wonderful work undertaken by civil society, including faith-based organisations, in rehabilitation and ask parishes to specifically pray for prisoners, their families and the work of these groups.
- Parishes should consider how they can help rehabilitation efforts in their local communities, including by working with existing groups in this field.

## *UK Government and its criminal justice agencies*

- Government and criminal justice agencies should actively facilitate the work of civil society groups that assist with rehabilitation.
- The Government should consider appointing a Royal Commission on Criminal Justice to investigate and advise on the challenges and opportunities facing all aspects of the criminal justice system.
- HMPPS prison governors should be supported and challenged to create time and space for prisoners to engage in purposeful activities outside their cells.
- The Government should ensure that HMPPS is appropriately resourced and prioritise the recruitment, training and retention of prison officers, including the greater involvement of prison governors in the appointment of suitable new prison staff.
- The Government and HMPPS should urgently address the challenges facing Probation Delivery Units.
- The Government and Sentencing Council should introduce a statutory presumption on courts to avoid issuing custodial sentences for female offenders found guilty of non-violent offences.
- HMPPS should ensure that prisoners receive any necessary vocational qualification in preparation for post-prison employment.
- HMPPS should better facilitate positive connections between prisoners and their families, such as the more regular provision of a free phone call on the first night in prison.
- The Ministry of Justice should employ on-site social workers in women's prisons to support positive connections between mothers and their children, in line with the recommendations of recent Government and independent reviews.<sup>113</sup>
- The Government should introduce a statutory duty on criminal justice agencies to identify the children of prisoners and investigate the services they are accessing, with a view to providing appropriate pathways to minimise the harm of parental imprisonment on the mental health, education and long-term wellbeing of these children.
- HMPPS should encourage the greater use of open prisons and day release to support the rehabilitation of offenders coming towards the end of long sentences and prepare them for a safe and constructive return to the community.
- Government should ensure the removal of prisons as places of safety under mental health legislation and manage the successful transfer of people suffering clinical mental health problems from prison to appropriate settings for treatment.

# Redemption

Through human co-operation and the grace of God, we hope for the redemption of individuals and situations to an even greater goodness than before



Credit: Andy Aitchison Photography

**Redemption is a key concept in Catholic social teaching on criminal justice but runs in stark contrast to much public discourse presenting punishment and rehabilitation as a zero-sum game. Based in the mutual compatibility of mercy and justice, redemption allows for the possibility of restoring personal and social relations to bear new and unexpected fruit.**

Redemption is something which God works in and through us. We are each capable of co-operating with grace of God to become more like Christ in our love for others and ourselves. While the redemption of individuals or situations can never be guaranteed through any single policy prescription or pastoral activity, we are still called to hope, by our heartfelt prayer and positive actions, for situations of crime and punishment to be transformed to an even greater goodness, while recognising that such suffering can never be forgotten and that there may be many cases where restoration and redemption are very difficult.

The compatibility of justice and mercy lies at the heart of the understanding of the criminal justice process as a journey of redemption. Care for the victim, dispensation of just punishment, rehabilitation of the offender and restoration of right relationships involve both the external administration of justice and the internal acceptance of the transformative power of mercy to heal the wounds of crime and division.

## Justice and Mercy

Pope Francis has recounted how the power of “fear and resentment” can “easily lead to viewing punishment in a vindictive and even cruel way, rather than as part of a process of healing and reintegration into society”.<sup>114</sup> This portrays the very real human realities of fear and despair which can obscure any vision of rehabilitation and the restoration of an ex-offender’s relationship with the community. As Catholics, we must rejoice when an ex-offender is able to take his or her place in society, just as the father welcomed back the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32). A natural human response, of course, is to behave like the older brother in that parable and resent the return of someone who has committed wrong. However, this would be to seek justice without mercy rather than allow for the relational growth that can come from forgiveness, healing and reconciliation.

Where the practice of justice might resolve a wrong in a transactional exchange of crime and punishment, the practice of mercy redeems the wider situation of broken relations, crucially by recognising the shared human dignity of all parties which endures beyond any event.

## Redemption in the Criminal Justice System in England and Wales

Openness to the possibility of redemption is particularly visible through the practice of restorative justice. Restorative justice, as defined by the Crown Prosecution Service, involves a process by which the parties involved in a particular offence together resolve to acknowledge and address the offence itself and its implications for the future.<sup>115</sup> Restorative justice aims to meet the needs of the victim, the offender and

the wider community in acknowledging the offence, agreeing a plan for reparation, and restoring confidence in the wider community. Particularly effective for youth offenders, it can take place in many forms and at any stage in the criminal justice process after conviction. The psychological benefits for victims of receiving a direct apology from their offender can be significant.<sup>116</sup> Research on the effectiveness of restorative justice has revealed that it can reduce re-offending, help victims and deepen public trust in the wider criminal justice system.<sup>117</sup>

At the same time, the practice of restorative justice can present challenges for participants, particularly if poorly managed. As previously recognised by the Catholic Bishops’ Conference in *A Journey of Hope* (2018), “some participants have had a negative experience in which offenders appear to be more interested in reducing their sentence than striving for genuine reconciliation” while “for those who have been effected [sic] by serious crime, the concept of restorative justice can be difficult to comprehend”.<sup>118</sup>

Despite a commitment since 2012 from the Government to provide effective restorative justice, the latest research indicates that while around a quarter of victims would have accepted an offer to meet the offender if it had been available, only around one in twenty victims were given the opportunity.<sup>119</sup> We therefore support the recent recommendations of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Restorative Justice and the Restorative Justice Council to improve the quality and quantity of restorative justice services throughout the criminal justice system across England and Wales.<sup>120</sup>

## Redemption in Civil Society

Civil society has a critical role to play in supporting the redemption of offenders and the wider community following the rupture of crime. Charities and voluntary associations, in tandem with the criminal justice system, can provide a physical space for the healing of personal and social relations, grounded in shared human dignity and the value of local knowledge and experience of the needs of the people and communities involved.

A notable example can be seen in the HMPPS Wales *Grand Avenues* project in Cardiff, Wales.<sup>121</sup> A ten-year pilot project, *Grand Avenues* is trialling a new approach whereby people on probation are supervised and supported by local community hubs and charities, such as the St Vincent de Paul Centre in Ely Bridge, Cardiff.<sup>122</sup> The project is premised on the view that the challenge of rehabilitation has a significant relational aspect which is often underserved by current probation services. By physically locating probation services within community settings, those on probation can be assisted in a way which recognises their gifts and talents as well as their crimes. Importantly, the approach is guided by the view that the ultimate aim of probation must be the re-integration of the offender into the community.

The early signs of the ten-year project have been promising, particularly regarding the personal, social and relational development of those serving on probation.<sup>123</sup> Peer mentoring, practical advice, and opportunities to use their skills to support the community can all combine to provide a renewed sense of identity and community for those on probation, so that ex-offenders can make new and positive contributions to the community.

Community chaplaincies can similarly play a vital role in supporting those who are leaving prison in their transition to the community. Established in the early years of the twenty-first century, community chaplaincies serve as independent faith-based voluntary organisations providing transitional support to meet the needs of those leaving prison and seeking to reintegrate into wider society. Separate from the religious convictions of such chaplaincies, the practical and relational value of these organisations in enabling ex-offenders to successfully rejoin the community cannot be overstated.<sup>124</sup>



## Catholic prison chaplaincy and parishes

The Catholic faith and practice can be especially valuable in the redemption of offenders and the healing of the community. Catholic chaplaincy within prison, and Catholic parishes outside prison, offer opportunities for offenders to come to a deeper understanding of both the reality of their actions and the truth of their human dignity. The voluntary experience of prayer, formation and fellowship can have a deeply transformative effect on the thoughts and actions of those who have committed crimes, helping them to atone for their past mistakes and believe in the possibility of a better future. This is the experience of our prison chaplains and the very large number of volunteers who assist them.<sup>125</sup>

Prison chaplaincy offers a lifeline to those suffering imprisonment and plays a pivotal part in prisoners' lives. It provides spiritual, psychological and social benefits. As well as supporting the practice of the Catholic faith through the sacraments and spiritual direction, prison chaplains provide wider pastoral care for prisoners of all faiths and none. Chaplains inhabit a unique position within prisons whereby they are respected as authority figures yet seen as separate from the punitive prison institution.<sup>126</sup> Their independent authority creates a helpful space in which prison chaplains and prisoners can build relationships of trust and support, which can sometimes help to heal the damaged relations with authority figures that offenders often experience.

There are challenges faced by Catholic chaplaincy in prisons. Recent reporting by the HM Chief Inspector of Prisons recorded that 30% of prisoners could not attend their religious services, and there remain significant vacancies in prison

chaplaincy.<sup>127</sup> Given the significance of prison chaplaincy for the well-being of prisoners, we urge HMPPS to ensure that prisoners are informed and supported to attend faith-based activities on a regular basis and without detriment to other purposeful activities. Moreover, we would encourage closer co-operation between HMPPS and the National Catholic Chaplain for Prisons to develop a national strategy for the better recruitment and retention of prison chaplains. Plentiful provision of prison chaplaincy is a key investment in the rehabilitation and restoration of offenders as more spiritually, emotionally and socially healthy members of the community.

Deepening the relationship between prisons and Catholic parishes can be an effective vehicle for the redemption of offenders and the healing of the community. It can be easy to forget that prisons sit within parish boundaries and that Catholic prisoners are technically members of a local parish. Upon leaving prison, Catholic parishes can provide a place of sanctuary and restoration for ex-offenders seeking to rebuild their relations with the community. There is a great opportunity in Catholic parishes to live out the Gospel by welcoming ex-offenders and supporting their reintegration. Initiatives such as the Parish Representative scheme run by the Prison Advice and Care Trust help to raise awareness within Catholic parishes of nearby prisons and the wider criminal justice system.<sup>128</sup>

There are, of course, pastoral and practical challenges in safely integrating ex-offenders within the parish community, particularly in finding the right balance between reassuring other parishioners and respecting the dignity and privacy of ex-offenders. Notwithstanding such challenges, we would strongly urge closer

connections between prisons and neighbouring Catholic parishes to provide a safe haven for those leaving prison to begin rebuilding their lives in the community. In particular, we urge Catholic parishes to register with the Welcome Directory in which they can advertise their openness to welcome and support prison leavers.<sup>129</sup> The growing network of Caritas Dioceses and other members of the Caritas Social Action Network (CSAN), such as the Manchester-based charity Out There, Irish Chaplaincy and the SVP, can be appropriate vehicles for increasing support in this area.<sup>130</sup>

By supporting the redemption of offenders through prison chaplaincy and parishes, the Catholic Church in England and Wales is not simply acting as another arm of civil society but rather promoting a message and method that seeks to radically transform social relations and the lives of ex-offenders. The Catholic approach to redemption seeks nothing less than the transfiguration of individuals and communities affected by crime. Fear, anxiety and despair are replaced by grace, mercy and hope as the wounds of crime are not only healed but bear new fruit. Although the memories of crime can never be forgotten, a past of disorder can be followed by a future of redemption. As Pope Francis recently stated on a visit to Montorio Prison in Verona, Italy, the upcoming 2025 Year of Jubilee provides an opportunity to “lay down the burden of the past and [...] return to being truly ourselves, giving our very best”.<sup>131</sup>

**“[L]ay down the burden of the past and [...] return to being truly ourselves, giving our very best”**

*Pope Francis, Address to the Meeting with the Police Prison Officers, Detainees and Volunteers (Montorio Prison, 2024)*



# Recommendations

## *Catholic Church in England and Wales*

- Catholic dioceses and parishes should encourage the lay Catholic faithful to consider a calling to visit those in prison and to support the work of groups such as the Prison Advice and Care Trust.
- Catholic parishes should register for the Welcome Directory, where appropriate, to welcome and support prison leavers, and a small number of Catholic parishes in each diocese could act as pioneer parishes for such activities.
- Parishes should consider how they can work more effectively with Catholic charities to welcome ex-offenders, such as encouraging parishioners to become Pact Parish Representatives.
- Catholic prison chaplains should be supported by their diocesan bishops to connect with local parishes and initiatives which can support offenders upon release.
- Pastoral guidance should be provided to Catholic dioceses and parishes on the safe and effective welcoming of ex-offenders to the parish community.

- The 2025 Year of Jubilee should be taken as an opportunity for Catholic dioceses and parishes to show mercy and share hope with those who have returned to the community having served sentences for their crimes.

## *UK Government and its criminal justice agencies*

- The Government should improve the quantity and quality of restorative justice services throughout the criminal justice system in England and Wales.
- HMPPS should further explore the possibility of community-based local probation projects, such as the Grand Avenues pilot project in Wales.
- HMPPS prison governors should ensure the reliable and regular availability and accessibility of prison chaplaincy and faith-based services across the prison estate.
- HMPPS should work alongside the National Catholic Chaplain for Prisons to develop a national strategy for the better recruitment and retention of Catholic prison chaplains.

## Conclusion

Any approach to the prudential matters facing the criminal justice process must involve state and civil society working together to seek the common good at every level of society

Congregation attending Mass celebrated by Cardinal Vincent Nichols in HMP Wormwood Scrubs (January 2022)

**“Christians need to be encouraged to participate in the debate on criminal justice and prisons and to apply their faith directly to issues of controversy. Christians need boldly to challenge the myths and prejudices which underlie so much penal populism”**

*Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales, A Place of Redemption (2004) p. 98*

**Written in 2004, these words of our previous landmark publication on criminal justice, *A Place of Redemption*, ring just as truly today.**

Chronic problems of sentence inflation, prison overcrowding and stubborn reoffending rates continue to corrode our criminal justice system. Concern for victims, fear of crime, lack of concern about conditions in prisons and their ineffectiveness as well as unease around rehabilitation continue to shape public discussion and political decision-making. Rather than succumb to vengeance or concede to the chaos of crime, the Catholic understanding of criminal justice calls us to pursue both justice and mercy through a proportionate balance between just punishment, rehabilitation and redemption.

The contribution of Catholic social teaching to such questions is particularly distinctive in the placing of the primacy of human dignity as the animating principle for the decisions of the legislature, judiciary and the wider community. Moreover, the Catholic social teaching principle of solidarity urges the treatment of criminal justice, from care for victims to support for the reintegration of ex-offenders, as a matter of right relationship for the wider community, rather than simply transactional exercises of crime and punishment. The principle of subsidiarity

highlights the value of local responses to such matters, rooted in the knowledge and understanding dispersed across families, charities, and local communities.

Faithful Catholics can reasonably disagree on the many prudential matters facing the criminal justice process in England and Wales, from the use of custodial sentences to the practice of restorative justice. Nevertheless, any approach to these matters must involve state and civil society working in tandem to seek the common good at every level of society to support victims, rehabilitate offenders and witness to the redemptive power of mercy. Given the many pressures on our courts, prisons and probation services, there is an open window of opportunity for civil society to better support the state in the practice of criminal justice.

**"I was in prison and you came to me [...] And the King will answer them, 'Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me'"**

*Matthew 25:36-40*

"I was in prison and you came to me [...] And the King will answer them, 'Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me'" (Matthew 25:36-40)

Sometimes cryptic in his teachings, Christ was clear in his command to remember the plight of the prisoner and to care for them in their marginalisation. There are many others to remember in the criminal justice system – victims, families, members of the judiciary, and wider society – and our care for them is central to our Christian calling. We recognise that the human practice of justice and mercy will always be imperfect and limited in some ways on earth. However, we can, in seeking the common good through legislation, community action and Christian charity, lay fitting foundation stones for the kingdom of God, to which a repentant criminal was one of the first entrants.



Pope Francis washing the feet of twelve women prisoners at the Casa Circondariale Femminile di Rebibbia in Rome, Italy (Maundy Thursday, 2024) (Credit: Vatican Media)

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- 14 See: [\*John 8:11\*](#).
- 15 See: [\*Luke 23:41\*](#). This is not to comment on the admissibility of capital punishment in the time of Christ, but rather to highlight that, at a fundamental level, St Dismas recognised that he had committed wrong and that his wrongdoing necessitated some proportionate punishment.
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