



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO PENITENTIARY POLICE AND TO STAFF OF THE PENITENTIARY
AND JUSTICE ADMINISTRATION FOR MINORS AND THE COMMUNITY**

*St Peter's Square
Saturday, 14 September 2019*

[Multimedia]

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning.

I welcome you and thank the Head of the Department of Prison Administration for his words.

I would like to address you with three simple words, in turn: first of all, to the Prison Police and to the administrative staff, I would like to say thank you. Thank you because your work is hidden, often difficult and unsatisfactory, but essential. Thank you for all the times that you live your service not only as necessary vigilance, but also as a support to those who are weak. I know that it is not easy but when, in addition to being guardians of security, you provide close presence for those who have been ensnared in the nets of evil, you become builders of the future: you lay the foundations for a more respectful coexistence and therefore for a safer society. Thank you because, by doing so, you become, day after day, *weavers of justice and hope*.

There is a passage in the New Testament, addressed to all Christians, which I believe is particularly suitable for you: "Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison" (*Heb 13: 3*). You find yourself in this situation, as you cross the threshold of so many places of pain every day, as you spend so much time between departments, while you are committed to ensuring safety without ever lacking respect for the human being. Please do not forget the good you can do every day. Your behaviour, your attitudes, your looks are precious. You are people who, faced with a wounded and often devastated humanity, recognize, in the name of the State and society, its irrepressible dignity. I therefore thank you for not only being vigilant, but above all for being guardians of the people entrusted to you, so that, in becoming aware of the evil done, they may welcome prospects of rebirth for the good of all. You are thus

called to be bridges between prison and civil society: with your service, exercising righteous compassion, you can overcome mutual fears and the tragedy of indifference.

I would also like to tell you not to be demotivated, even among the tensions that can arise in detention facilities. In your work, everything that makes you feel united is of great help: first of all the support of your families, who are close to you in your labours. And then there is mutual encouragement, sharing among colleagues, which allows us to tackle difficulties together and helps to deal with shortcomings. Among these, I think in particular of the problem of overcrowding in prisons, which increases in everyone a sense of weakness, if not exhaustion. When strength diminishes, distrust increases. It is essential to ensure decent living conditions, otherwise prisons become dustbins of rage, rather than places of recovery.

A second word is for the chaplains, the religious, the religious and the volunteers: you are the bearers of the Gospel within the walls of the prisons. I would like to say to you: keep going. Keep going, when you enter into the most difficult situations with the strength of a smile and a heart that listens, keep going when you load yourself with the burdens of others and carry them in prayer. Keep going when, in contact with the poverty you encounter, you see your own poverty. It is a good thing, because it is essential to recognize oneself first of all in need of forgiveness. Then your own miseries become receptacles of God's mercy; then, when you are forgiven, you become credible witnesses of God's forgiveness. Otherwise one risks bringing oneself and one's presumed self-sufficiency. Keep going, as with your mission you offer consolation. And it is so important not to abandon those who feel alone.

I would also like to dedicate to you a phrase from Scripture, that people murmured against Jesus seeing him go to Zacchaeus, a tax collector accused of injustice and robbery: "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner!" (*Lk* 19: 7). The Lord went, He did not stop before the prejudices of those who believe that the Gospel is intended for "good people". On the contrary, the Gospel asks for hands to get dirty. Next, then, with Jesus and in way of Jesus, Who calls you to be patient sowers of His word (cf. *Mt* 13: 18-23), tireless seekers of what is lost, heralds of the certainty that each person is precious to God, shepherds who put the weakest sheep on their own fragile shoulders (cf. *Lk* 15:4-10). Go forward with generosity and joy: with your ministry you console the heart of God.

Finally, a third word, which I would like to address to the prisoners. It is the word courage. Jesus Himself says it to you. "Courage comes from the heart. Courage, because you are in God's heart, you are precious in His eyes and, even if you feel lost and unworthy, do not lose heart. You are important to God, Who wants to work wonders in you. For you, too, a phrase from the Bible: "God is greater than our heart" (1 *Jn* 3: 20). Never let yourselves be imprisoned in the dark cell of a hopeless heart, do not give in to resignation. God is greater than any problem and is waiting for you to love you. Put yourselves before the Crucified One, before the gaze of Jesus: before Him, with simplicity, with sincerity. From there, from the humble courage of those who do not lie to

themselves, peace is reborn; the confidence of being loved and the strength to move forward blossom again. I imagine looking at you and seeing in your eyes disappointments and frustration, while hope still beats in your heart, often linked to the memory of your loved ones. Take courage, never suffocate the flame of hope.

Dear brothers and sisters, to revive this flame is the duty of all. It is up to every society to feed it, to ensure that punishment does not compromise the right to hope, that prospects of reconciliation and reintegration are guaranteed. While remedying the mistakes of the past, we cannot erase hope in the future. Life imprisonment is not the solution to problems, but a problem to be solved. Because if hope is locked up, there is no future for society. Never deprive anyone of the right to start over! You, dear brothers and sisters, with your work and your service are witnesses of this right: *the right to hope, the right to start anew*. I renew my *thanks* to you. *Keep going, take courage*, with God's blessing, caring for those entrusted to you. I pray for you and I ask you too to pray for me.

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