

Homily - Prisoners Sunday 2018 - Bringing Humanity and Hope

'Bringing Humanity and Hope to Prisons - that is the title of an article which Richard Moth, the lead RC Bishop for prisons in England and Wales - recently contributed to the Catholic Universe newspaper (28.9.18).

In that article he makes the following important observations:

The penal system in this country is under severe strain; some staff are not in control; and prisoners are not being cared for well enough to enable their rehabilitation.

One of the driving factors behind the current crisis is the overuse of custodial sentences. Inflation of such sentencing over recent years, and the continued use of ineffective short sentences have resulted in an unsustainable prison population.

This means that our prisons are unable to help people turn their lives around. Having prisons at breaking point is harmful to the people inside them, and does not lead to a safer society.

There is a very real need for the Government to improve sentencing to ensure that prisons are not overcrowded and that genuine chances of rehabilitation are not ruined.

There is wide consensus that **short** custodial sentences for non-violent crimes are damaging not only for individuals but for family, friends, colleagues and dependents. Short spells in prison often create a downward spiral that results in greater criminal activity.

One example is that of a singlemother, unable to pay her bills and charged with rent arrears. She was given a two-week custodial sentence. During these two weeks her children were taken into the care system, she fell in with a dangerous crowd in prison, and began to take drugs to which she became addicted.

Cases like these make clear the irrevocable damage that unnecessary short sentencing can cause.

Both the Minister for Prisons, Rory Stewart MP, and the Lord Chancellor David Gauke MP, have indicated that they wish to significantly reduce the number of short custodial sentences. This is welcome news and the role of charities, faith-groups, and the general public is to hold the Ministry of Justice to account on these promises.

But the case for changing sentencing practice must not stop there. A truly effective reform of our criminal justice system must also look at the status quo around **longer** sentences as well.

There is a dangerous overuse of Imprisonment for Public Protection (IPP sentences) which creates a backlog in the prison system of those waiting for release.

A recent example is of a prisoner who had waited 11 **years** for parole after having spent his ten **month** sentence. Prisoners with no hope for life outside, or for a meaningful existence inside, are often those struggling most with their mental health. This is, of course, not only dangerous for the individual but for other prisoners and for staff as well.

There are also major problems around sentencing inflation:

Over the last 30 years the prison population in England and Wales has rocketed, despite a noticeable fall in recorded crime.

Over the last 10 years the length of prison sentences for the same offences has risen, meaning that people are spending longer in prison.

Government has a duty to address the reasons for this and ensure that the trend does not continue.

Or they must provide the funding that is required to provide safe and decent prisons that can cope with the number of people being sent into custody.

If the problems that exist around sentencing are not addressed we will continue to see reports of prisons struggling and of lives that are marked by an absence of hope.

This country needs a criminal justice system that works and offers a genuinely rehabilitative environment. This is not a 'soft' approach to crime, but a realistic one that would help to bring more humanity and hope to our prison estate.