

## BENEDICT XVI: REHABILITATION OF PRISONERS IS THE CULMINATING FEATURE OF PENAL SYSTEMS

Vatican City, 22 November 2012 (VIS) - This morning Benedict XVI received participants in the seventeenth Council of Europe Conference of Directors of Prison Administration.

Speaking English, the Holy Father observed that "matters of criminal justice are continually being brought to the attention of the public and of governments, especially at a time when economic and social inequalities and increasing individualism are feeding the roots of criminality. There is a tendency, though, to limit the debate to the legislative aspect of the question of crime and punishment or to the judicial process. ... Less attention is given to the way custodial sentences are carried out. In this regard, alongside the parameter of 'justice', another essential element is respect for human dignity and human rights. Yet this too, while indispensable and unfortunately still far from being observed in many countries, is not enough to safeguard fully the rights of the individual.

"A concrete commitment is needed, not just a statement of principle, in order to bring about the offender's effective re-education, which is required both for the sake of his own dignity and with a view to his reintegration into society. ... If human justice in this area is to look to divine justice and be shaped by that higher vision, the re-educational purpose of the sentence must be regarded not as an ancillary or secondary aspect of the penal system, but rather as its culminating and defining feature.

"In order to 'practise justice', it is not enough that those found guilty of crimes be simply punished: it is necessary that in punishing them, everything possible be done to correct and improve them. When this does not happen, justice is not done in an integral sense. In any event, it is important to avoid giving rise to a situation where imprisonment that fails in its re-educational role becomes counter-educational and paradoxically reinforces rather than overcomes the tendency to commit crime and the threat posed to society by the individual".

The Pope underlined how prison directors and their collaborators in the judicial and social fields can make "a significant contribution, together with all those responsible for the administration of justice in society, towards promoting this 'more genuine' justice that is 'open to the liberating power of love' and is tied to human dignity. ... Contact with offenders paying the price for what they have done and the commitment needed to restore dignity and hope to people who in many cases have already suffered marginalisation and scorn call to mind the mission of Christ Himself, Who came to call not the just, but sinners, the privileged recipients of divine mercy".

The Holy Father continued, "Everyone is called to become his brother's keeper, transcending the homicidal indifference of Cain. You in particular are asked to take custody of people who, in prison conditions, are at greater risk of losing their sense of life's meaning and the value of personal dignity, yielding instead to discouragement and despair. Profound respect for persons, commitment to the rehabilitation of prisoners, fostering a genuinely educational community: these things are all the more urgent, in view of the growing number of 'foreign prisoners', whose circumstances are often difficult and precarious".

"Particularly important in this regard is the promotion of forms of evangelisation and spiritual care, capable of drawing out the most noble and profound side of the prisoner, awakening his enthusiasm for life and his desire for beauty, so characteristic of people who discover anew that they bear within them the indelible image of God", the Holy Father concluded.