

Easter Season 2021:
“Lord, when did we see You... in prison?”
Solidarity with our Incarcerated Sisters and Brothers

"I think to myself, 'I, too, could be here.' That is, none of us can be sure that we would never commit a crime, something for which we'd be put in prison."

-Pope Francis during a visit to a prison

During this joyful season of Easter, we celebrate that in Christ, sin and death do not have the final victory. Despite our own sins and failings, Christ loves us and brought that love to the cross and grave to redeem us. We now share in the hope and life His Resurrection gives us. We are called to extend forgiveness, redemption, and love to everyone, especially the marginalized, the people who are His presence in the world.

Our Diocesan Public Policy Committee is asking parishes to learn about and speak up for the God-given human dignity of our sisters and brothers who are incarcerated. Please print the following reflections in your parish bulletins and incorporate the prayers of the faithful into your Sunday and daily Masses to help raise awareness and solidarity on these issues.

Bulletin notice #1

“Lord, when did we see You... in prison?” Matthew 25:39

“Please, don’t give up on them.”- A former inmate speaking to a jail ministry on behalf of her incarcerated friends

We have many times heard Jesus speak about ‘giving liberty to captives’ (Luke 4:18), and we are always deeply touched by His compassion upon the crucified thief who asked Jesus to remember him as he entered into His Kingdom. Yest, we might ask ourselves how often our own outreach concerns extend to our incarcerated brothers and sisters and their families. Are we aware of the conditions in jails and prisons on our society?

America’s rate of incarceration is great than any other nation’s in the world: although our country has 5% of the world’s population, it has 25% of is prisoners. Sentence length and time served are much longer in the US than elsewhere, and include more solitary confinement, less rehabilitations, and poor re-entry assistance. The levels of Covid-19 in many of our prisons promoted one NYC inmate to remark, “It’s...like we aren’t even human.” A crime data expert at the Brennan Center for Justice recently observed, “It is really a system that sets people up for failure.” ([America](#), August 2020)

As we continue to struggle with our own confinements during the pandemic, let us deepen our understanding of the sufferings of our incarcerated sisters and brother and pray to know how we can best care for them. In the coming weeks of this Easter Season, our Diocesan Public Policy Committee will be providing further information and assistance to parishes in these efforts.

Bulletin notice #2:

“Lord, when did we see You... in prison?” Matthew 25:39

Our Diocesan Public Policy Committee continues to ask Catholics to learn about and speak out for more humane conditions for incarcerated people. In New York State, even as the overall prison population has declined, the percentage of older incarcerated people has increased. One in four are 50 or older. The vast majority are Black and brown people, highlighting the racial bias in the system. Research shows older people, especially those who were convicted of serious crimes, have the lowest reincarceration rates of any age cohort, posing little to no risk.

We are asking for your support of two bills that would give more prisoners the opportunity to be released on parole. The **Fair and Timely Parole** (S.1415/A.4231) bill would mandate that prisoners who've served their terms be granted parole unless they pose a clear risk of violating the law. It would give people a chance to be assessed for parole on the reforms they've made to their characters, and not just on their past crimes. The **Elder Parole** (S.15/A.3475) bill allows people in New York State prison aged 55 and older who have served 15 or more consecutive years to be considered for parole, regardless of their crime or sentence. Please call your Assembly member and State Senator and ask them to support these bills:

State Senate switchboard:(518) 455-2800 State Assembly switchboard: (518) 455-4100

Bulletin note #3

“Lord, when did we see You... in prison?” Matthew 25:39

“Today we state clearly that the death penalty is inadmissible, and the Church is firmly committed to calling for its abolition worldwide.” -Pope Francis, Fratelli Tutti

In July 2019, capital punishment in federal cases was resumed in the U.S. after a 16 year hiatus. At the very heart of Catholic teaching is reverence for the inviolable dignity of the human being and the belief that every person, made in the image and likeness of God, is given the opportunity for redemption. This includes those who have cause great harm. Saint Pope John Paul II in his encyclical The Gospel of Life, emphatically proclaimed, “Not even a murderer loses his personal dignity.” (EV, 9) Pointing out that the death penalty affects people of color and people in poverty most often, Fr. Kevin McKenna, rector of Sacred Heart Cathedral in Rochester, in his Concise Guide to Catholic Social Teaching, writes, “In the conditions of contemporary American Society, the legitimate purposes of punishment do not justify the imposition of the death penalty. There are serious considerations which should prompt Christians and all Americans to support the abolition of capital punishment.”

Bulletin note #3 Parish Involvement with prison/jail ministry
“Lord, when did we see You... in prison?” Matthew 25:39

There are many ways in which a parish may get involved in prison or jail ministry. They can be as simple as sending cards on Christmas to organizing bible studies and focus groups to address certain issues. The first thing a parish would want to do is see if there are members of the congregation interested in the topic of ministry to the incarcerated. Many times, there are members who know someone who spent time in prison or who have been incarcerated themselves. These people are valuable resources to offer firsthand experiences in visiting inmates or living among them. They typically have a heartfelt desire to bring the mercy of God and the hope of Jesus to those in hopeless situations which landed them behind bars.

Articles could be published about issues inmates face and adding prayers of the faithful can highlight the importance of ministry to the imprisoned. A couple examples are:

We pray for all who are in prison or detention: May they understand that they are loved, and on release, find a fulfilling and rewarding life, helped by family, friends and the community.

We pray for ourselves that we don't forget those who are shut away from us while always remaining aware of our own weaknesses; and have gratitude for the guidance and protection we have received.

Bulletin note #4 Parish Involvement with prison/jail ministry
“Lord, when did we see You... in prison?” Matthew 25:39

"I think to myself, 'I, too, could be here.' That is, none of us can be sure that we would never commit a crime, something for which we'd be put in prison." -Pope Francis during a visit to a prison

There are many ways in which a parish may get involved in prison or jail ministry. Here are some ideas to encourage that outreach:

- Highlight some saints that paid particular attention to the imprisoned like St. Joseph Cafasso or saints imprisoned in their lives like Pope Callistus or Servants of God like Jacques Fesch.
- Distribute the free Station of the Cross books from the Knights of Columbus for those who are in prison
- Learn about Residents Encountering Christ (REC), a lay Catholic movement to bring the gospel into prisons
- Contact the Jail Ministry office of our diocese at 585-328-3227 to connect to jail and prison chaplains to ask how you can help
- Coordinate a card drive for Easter or Christmas with the assistance of these chaplains
- Offer to facilitate a bible study for a Catholic chaplain in a prison or jail for the inmates
- Sponsor Holy Hours for the sake of the imprisoned for their conversion
- Donate 'breakable' rosaries as they are the only ones allowed inside
- Find out ways that the inmates may serve their families through your efforts, prayers, or donations. i.e. visits to a sick family member, gifts to their children.

A final thought is for sure, you have the privilege to touch the heart of a person starving for goodness and love. Grab the opportunity!

Suggested Prayers of the Faithful

We pray that during this Holy Season celebrating our redemption and God's great mercy, we will be moved to show that same compassion to our brothers and sisters who are confined in prisons and jails, we pray to the Lord

That our governor and state legislators will make prison reform a priority in our state that all incarcerated people will be treated humanely and have resources and encouragement to reform their lives, we pray to the Lord

That our state's parole system will reflect the Church's regard for human dignity and God's justice by reforming outdated approaches and eliminating racial bias, we pray to the Lord

That our nation's leaders will be inspired by Pope Francis' call for the full abolition of the death penalty and will speedily end capital punishment in our country, we pray to the Lord

For the children and family members of our imprisoned brothers and sisters, that dedicated Christians will work to support them and will show them loving acceptance, we pray to the Lord

That parishes throughout our diocese will create ways to reach out to our sisters and brothers who are incarcerated, and bring them support, hope and love, we pray to the Lord

That as God's divine mercy touches our heart this Easter season, we will reach out with love and concern for those who are confined to prisons and jails, we pray to the Lord

That our country will see that we cannot end violence by committing more violence, and will quickly end the use of the death penalty, we pray to the Lord