

Justice, Peace and Life

February 2016

“Every time I go through the gates into a prison to celebrate Mass or for a visit, I always think: Why them and not me? I should be here. I deserve to be here. Their fall could have been mine.”

-Pope Francis, The Name of God is Mercy

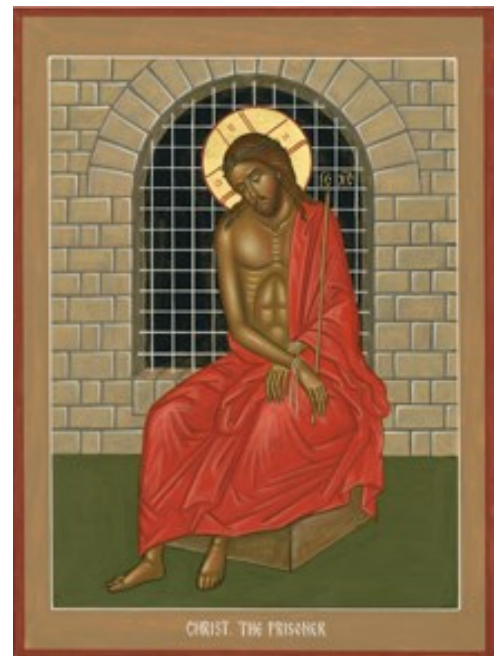
MERCY FOR THE INCARCERATED

During this Jubilee Year of Mercy, we are reminded that one of the corporal works of mercy is to visit the imprisoned. In our diocese, county jails and state prisons abound, as do opportunities to join our diocesan prison chaplains in their ministry. You'll find their contact information at the end of this [document](#) on the diocesan web site.

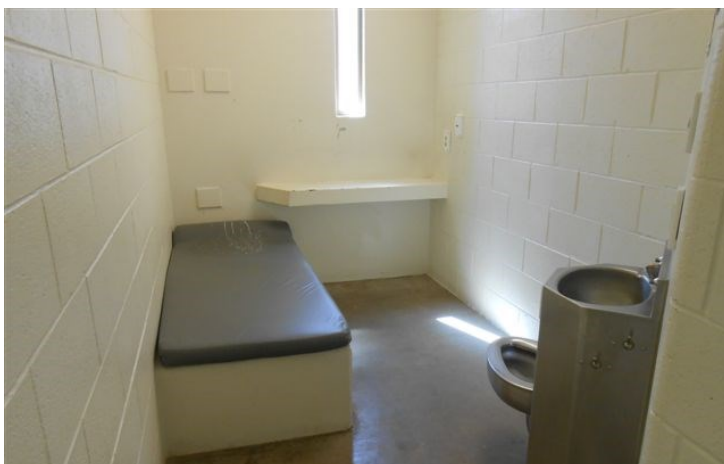
Even if you can't visit the incarcerated directly you can still show them mercy by advocating for more just and humane prison conditions. Our New York State Catholic Conference is supporting a bill called the *Humane Alternatives to Long-Term Solitary Confinement Act*.

“This bill would: limit the time an inmate can spend in segregated confinement, end the segregated confinement of vulnerable people, restrict the criteria that can result in such confinement, improve conditions of confinement, and create more humane and effective alternatives to such confinement.

Solitary and other forms of isolated confinement are inhumane, counterproductive, and unsafe. People in isolated confinement in New York State spend **22 to 24 hours a day** locked in a cell the size of an elevator. Isolated confinement fails to address the underlying causes of problematic behavior, and often exacerbates that behavior as people deteriorate psychologically, physically, and socially.



“Christ the Prisoner” by Nikolai Tsai



Solitary confinement cell, also called the “SHU” or Solitary Housing Unit

Learn more at www.nycaic.org

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture has denounced solitary confinement that exceeds 15 days. Additionally, there are far too many people in isolation, disproportionately people of color. **On any given day, about 4,000 men, women, and children are in isolated confinement in New York State prisons.** Even particularly vulnerable people are held in isolated confinement. Minors or people with mental illness are disproportionately likely to be placed in isolation. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the NYS Catholic Conference have long called for ending torture and has campaigned against solitary confinement.”

Please contact your State Senator and Assembly Member to ask them to support the HALT bill.
Senate switchboard: **(518) 455-2800**
Assembly switchboard: **(518) 455-4100**
If you don't know who your representatives are, the switchboard operators will look them up for you.

Further Advocacy for Humane Prison Conditions

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and Catholic Charities USA are calling for support of the **Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act**. They write: "While not perfect, it is an important first step in reforming our nation's broken criminal justice system. The bill would do the following:

- Reduce mandatory minimum sentences from some drug offenses;
- Give judges discretion to depart from mandatory minimums for some drug offenses;
- Expand "safety valves" to give judges more flexibility in sentencing;
- Counter recidivism by expanding prison-based rehabilitation programs;
- Give judges discretion to reduce juvenile life-without-parole sentences;
- Limit the use of solitary confinement for juveniles.

Rigid sentencing policies for non-violent offenses are costly, ineffective and can be detrimental to the good of persons, families and communities. Prolonged incarceration contributes to family instability and poverty. Those who finally leave incarceration face significant challenges upon reentering society, such as finding housing and stable employment, high rates of substance abuse, and physical and mental health challenges. One-size-fits-all sentencing policies, such as mandatory minimums, are inadequate in addressing the complexities of crime and community safety.

Instead of directing a vast amount of public resources to imprison more people and build more prisons and jails, government should support effective programs aimed at crime prevention, rehabilitation, education efforts, substance abuse treatment, as well as programs of probation, parole and reintegration. Our Catholic tradition supports the community's right to establish and enforce laws that protect people and advance the common good. But our faith also teaches us that both victims and offenders have a God-given dignity that calls for justice and restoration, not vengeance." Click [here](#) to send an e-mail in support of this bill.

Lenten Practices to Care for Our Common Home:

- 1) **Join the Lent Fast for Climate Justice on February 25 and on March 25 (Good Friday)**, sponsored by the Global Catholic Climate Movement. **"Let's pray and fast for the renewal of our relationship with creation and with our brothers and sisters in poverty who are already suffering the impacts of climate change."** You can fast from food (during a whole day or at least one meal) and/or from activities that produce carbon dioxide (reducing our use of fossil fuels, electricity, plastic, paper and toxins).

Sign up here: www.catholicclimatemovement.global/lenten-fast



The Global Catholic Climate Movement

- 2) Click [here](#) to join the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Catholic Climate Covenant in advocating for federal grants to non-profit organizations to make their buildings more energy efficient. "This is a win-win that would help nonprofits reduce their operating costs and reduce their carbon footprints."

- 3) Read about and advocate for other policies to address climate change:

www.catholicclimatecovenant.org/act/advocate

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