



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II FOR THE JUBILEE IN PRISONS

1. In the framework of this Holy Year of 2000 it was unthinkable that there should not be a *Day of Jubilee for Prisoners*. Prison gates cannot exclude from the benefits of this great event those who find themselves spending part of their lives behind them.

In remembering these brothers and sisters, I first wish to express the hope that the Risen Lord, who entered the Upper Room through closed doors, will enter all the prisons of the world and find a welcome in the hearts of those within, bringing peace and serenity to everyone.

In this Jubilee, the Church celebrates in a special way *the mystery of the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ*. Two thousand years have passed since the Son of God was made man and came to dwell among us. Today as then, the salvation brought by Christ is continually being offered to us, that it may bear abundant fruits of goodness in keeping with the plan of God who wishes to save all his children, especially those who have gone away from him and are looking for the way back. The Good Shepherd is always going in search of the lost sheep, and when he finds them he puts them on his shoulders and brings them back to the flock. *Christ is in search of every human being, whatever the situation!*

2. This is because Jesus wants to save each one. And with a salvation which is *offered, not imposed*. What Christ is looking for is trusting acceptance, an attitude which opens the mind to generous decisions aimed at rectifying the evil done and fostering what is good. Sometimes this involves a long journey, but always a stimulating one, for it is a journey not made alone, but in the company of Christ himself and with his support. Jesus is a patient travelling companion, who respects the seasons and rhythms of the human heart. He never tires of encouraging each person along the path to salvation.

The experience of the Jubilee is closely linked to the human experience of the passage of time, to which it seeks *to give meaning*. On the one hand, the Jubilee is intended to help us to remember

the past, treasuring the experiences it has brought. On the other hand, the Jubilee opens us to the future, in which human commitment and divine grace must together fashion the time left to us to live.

Those in prison look back with regret or remorse to the days when they were free, and they experience their time now as a burden which never seems to pass. In this difficult situation, a *strong experience of faith* can greatly help in finding the inner balance which every human being needs. This is one reason why the Jubilee is so relevant to prison life: the experience of the Jubilee lived behind bars can open up unexpected human and spiritual vistas.

3. The Jubilee reminds us that *time belongs to God*. Even time in prison does not escape God's dominion. Public authorities who deprive human beings of their personal freedom as the law requires, bracketing off as it were a longer or shorter part of their life, must realize that *they are not masters of the prisoners' time*. In the same way, those who are in detention must not live as if their time in prison had been taken from them completely: *even time in prison is God's time*. As such it needs to be lived to the full; it is a time which needs to be offered to God as a occasion of truth, humility, expiation and even faith. The Jubilee serves to remind us that not only does time belong to God, but that the moments in which we succeed in "restoring" all things in Christ become for us "a time of the Lord's favour".

During the Jubilee, all are called to synchronize the unique and unrepeatable time of their own heart with the time of the merciful heart of God. He is always ready to journey with each one, at their own pace, towards salvation. At times prison life runs the risk of depersonalizing individuals, because it deprives them of so many opportunities for self-expression. But they must remember that before God this is not so. The Jubilee is time for the person, when each one is himself before God, in his image and likeness. And each one is called to move more quickly towards salvation and to advance in the gradual discovery of the truth about himself.

4. The Jubilee is about change. The Old Testament Jubilee year "was meant to restore equality among all the children of Israel, offering new possibilities to families which had lost their property and even their personal freedom" (*Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 13). The prospect which the Jubilee sets before each one is therefore *an opportunity not to be missed*. The Holy Year must be used as a chance to right injustices committed, to mitigate excesses, and to recover what might otherwise be lost. And if this is true of every aspect of life, since everything human is capable of improvement, it is especially true of the experience of prison, where life is particularly difficult.

But the Jubilee is not just about measures to redress situations of injustice. It also has a positive intention. Just as in ever new ways the mercy of God creates fresh opportunities for growing in goodness, so also to celebrate the Jubilee means *to strive to find new paths of redemption* in every personal and social situation, even if the situation seems desperate. This is even more obvious with regard to prison life: not to promote the interests of prisoners would be to make

imprisonment a mere act of vengeance on the part of society, provoking only hatred in the prisoners themselves.

5. If the Great Jubilee is a chance for those in prison to reflect upon their situation, the same may be said of *civil society as a whole*, which every day has to come to grips with the reality of crime. It can be said of *the authorities* who have to maintain public order and promote the common good, and of *those in the legal profession*, who ought to reflect on the meaning of inflicting punishment and suggest better proposals for society to aim at.

These issues have been addressed often enough in history, and substantial progress has been made in conforming the penal system both to the dignity of the human person and to the effective maintenance of public order. But the unease and strains felt in the complex world of the administration of justice and, even more, the suffering attached to prison life show that there is still much to be done. We are still a long way from the time when our conscience can be certain of having done everything possible to prevent crime and to control it effectively so that it no longer does harm and, at the same time, to offer to those who commit crimes a way of redeeming themselves and making a positive return to society. If all those in some way involved in the problem tried to take advantage of the occasion offered by the Jubilee to develop this line of thought, perhaps humanity as a whole could take a great step forward in creating a more serene and peaceful society.

Imprisonment as punishment is as old as human history. In many countries, prisons are very overcrowded. Some of them are equipped with good facilities, but living conditions in others are very precarious, not to say altogether unworthy of human beings. What is clear to all is that this kind of punishment generally succeeds only in part in addressing the phenomenon of crime. In fact, in some cases detention seems to create more problems than it solves. *This must prompt rethinking* with a view to some kind of reform: from this perspective too the Jubilee is an opportunity not to be missed.

According to God's plan, all must play their part in helping to build a better society. Obviously, this includes making a great effort in the area of crime prevention. In spite of everything criminal actions are committed. For all to play their part in building the common good they must work, in the measure of their competence, to ensure that prisoners have the means to redeem themselves, both as individuals and in their relations with society. Such a process is based on growth in the sense of responsibility. None of this should be considered utopian. Those who are in a position to do so must strive to incorporate these aims in the legal system.

6. In this regard, therefore, we must hope for a change of attitude, leading to an appropriate adjustment of the juridical system. Clearly this presupposes a strong social consensus and the relative professional skills. A strong appeal of this kind comes from the countless prisons throughout the world, in which millions of our brothers and sisters are held. Above all they call for a

review of prison structures, and in some cases a revision of penal law. Regulations contrary to the dignity and fundamental rights of the human person should be definitively abolished from national legislation, as should laws which deny prisoners religious freedom. There will also have to be a review of prison regulations where they give insufficient attention to those who have serious or terminal illnesses. Likewise, institutions offering legal protection to the poor must be further developed.

But even in cases where legislation is satisfactory, much suffering comes to prisoners from other sources. I am referring in particular to the wretched state of some of the places of detention where prisoners are forced to live, and the harassment to which they are sometimes subjected because of ethnic, social, economic, sexual, political and religious discrimination. Sometimes prisons can become places of violence resembling the places from which the inmates not infrequently come. Clearly this nullifies any attempt to educate through imprisonment.

People in prison also find it difficult to maintain regular contact with their families and loved ones, and structures intended to help those leaving prison in their re-entry into society are often seriously flawed.

Appeal to Governments

7. The Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 continues the tradition of the Jubilee Years that have gone before it. On each occasion the celebration of a Holy Year has been an opportunity for the Church and the world to do something in favour of justice, in the light of the Gospel. Jubilees have been an incentive for the community to reconsider human justice against the measure of God's justice. Only a calm appraisal of the functioning of penal institutions, a candid recognition of the goals society has in mind in confronting crime, and a serious assessment of the means adopted to attain these goals have led in the past and can still lead to identifying the corrections which need to be made. It is not a question of an automatic or purely cosmetic application of acts of clemency. This would not affect the essence of things: once the Jubilee is over the situation would return to the way it was. It is a question rather of fostering initiatives which will lay a solid basis for a genuine renewal of both attitudes and institutions.

In this sense, those States and Governments which are already engaged in or are planning to undertake a review of their prison system in order to bring it more into line with the requirements of the human person should be encouraged to continue in such an important task. This includes giving more consideration to penalties other than imprisonment.

To make prison life more human it is more important than ever to take practical steps to enable prisoners as far as possible to engage in work which keeps them from the degrading effects of idleness. They could be given access to a process of training which would facilitate their re-entry into the workforce when they have served their time. Nor should the psychological assistance

which can help resolve personality problems be overlooked. Prison should not be a corrupting experience, a place of idleness and even vice, but instead a place of redemption.

To this end, it will certainly help if prisoners are offered the chance to deepen their relationship with God and to become involved in charitable projects and works of solidarity. This will help to speed up their social recovery and to make prisons more livable places.

In the context of these proposals, looking to the future and continuing a tradition begun by my Predecessors in Jubilee Years, I turn with confidence to State authorities to ask for *a gesture of clemency* towards all those in prison: a reduction, even a modest one, of the term of punishment would be for prisoners a clear sign of sensitivity to their condition, and would surely evoke a positive echo in their hearts and encourage them to regret the evil done and lead them to personal repentance.

Acceptance of this proposal by the competent authorities would not only encourage prisoners to look to the future with new hope but would also be an eloquent sign, at the dawn of the Third Christian Millennium, of a growing worldwide affirmation of a justice that is more genuine because it is open to the liberating power of love.

Upon all those responsible for the administration of justice in society and also upon those who have incurred the sanctions of the law I invoke the Lord's blessings. May God abundantly shed his light upon each of them and grant them the fullness of his heavenly favours. Assuring the men and women who are in prison throughout the world that I am close to them in spirit, I embrace them all as brothers and sisters in the human family.

From the Vatican, 24 June 2000.