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Catholic prison chaplains' congress calls for more humane treatment of prisoners around the world

A meeting of the International Commission of Catholic Prison Pastoral Care in Rome recently called for a more humane treatment of prisoners in many countries, with particular emphasis on the vulnerable, such as the mentally ill, drug addicts, foreigners and elderly people.

Sr Mary Pauline Staunton RSC, who has long and distinguished experience in prison chaplaincy, attended the meeting as the delegate for the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. Ten Australians participated in the Congress, which had the theme, "Discovering Christ's Face in Every Prisoner".

In her initial report, Sr Mary Pauline said "the Australian Chaplains found that attendance at the Congress was a very informative and worthwhile experience. They made a valuable contribution to the success of the Congress".

The Final Declaration from the Congress said that those in prison, like all human beings, have inherent dignity and fundamental rights which spring from their being "at the image" of the Divine Creator. "Their incarceration, for whatever reason, does not diminish this image."

The Declaration acknowledged "That in many countries the basic human rights of prisoners are not guaranteed; their religious liberty is not respected and the Church is prevented from attending to the spiritual and material needs of the prisoners.

"Most prisons are overcrowded; the prisoners are abused and their needs are not satisfied. In many countries capital punishment and other penalties that are incompatible with human dignity still exist.

"These inhumane expressions of institutional cruelty must be rectified by abolishing death penalty, putting an end to torture and observing the UN Standards and Norms in the field of crime prevention and criminal justice."

The Declaration made particular note that "the current criminal justice system in many countries fails to address the needs of children in conflict with the law as well as the vulnerable sectors of our society such as the mentally ill, drug addicts, foreigners and elderly people.

"We advocate that programs, laws and systems be put in place to attend to the needs of these groups."

The Congress Declaration called for justice systems which makes offenders accountable for what they have done; "a justice that provides restitution to the victims who are most the time ignored and forgotten by the current justice system; a justice that engages the community in facilitating the healing process, thus leading to the re-integration of the victim and the offender to the community".

The Congress also recognised with gratitude the remarkable work of prison pastoral care ministers in many countries who, "despite their limitations and countless problems, are able to work for genuine justice, liberty, mercy, reconciliation and hope, thereby making God's love visible".

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