

**Speech at the Launch of the
Australian Catholic Bishops'**

Social Justice Statement 2011–2012

***Building Bridges, Not Walls
Prisons and the justice system***

Given by

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Let me thank Graham West and Margaret Wiseman for their inspiring contributions this morning in launching the Social Justice Statement for 2011–2012. I specially want to pay tribute to the many people who have been involved in the drafting, editing and production of this Statement.

Among those people are the prison chaplains who work every day with men and women in prison, comforting them, recognising their needs, and listening to them in a way that, often, no one else can. They remind us of something society is in danger of forgetting: prisoners are human beings. They're individuals – somebody's son or somebody's daughter. They're someone we went to school with. Very often, they're somebody's mother or father.

But after years of being warehoused in one or another of Australia's prison systems, inmates can end up like the man mentioned in the story that begins this Statement. The chaplain said to him: 'I hope I'm alive to see you living as a normal man outside'. The inmate replied: 'I don't know what a normal man would look like'. As Christians and as citizens we are called in this Statement to help people like him to return to a normal life.

Christians know that a human being is someone who is made in the image of God. So if we forget the humanity of prisoners, then in a significant way we've forgotten our Christian calling. In 2007, Catholic prison chaplains from all over the world gathered in Rome for an international congress. Their theme was 'Discovering the Face of Christ in Every Prisoner'.

The icon on the cover of this Statement portrays the face of Christ. We want everyone who reads this Statement to see that face and to remember it as they think of those in prison.

We remember also the families of those inside. Tomorrow Catholics celebrate the memorial of Our Lady of Sorrows. In the Gospel reading from Luke, the wise and devout Simeon foretells of the great pain and burden of compassion Mary would bear during the sufferings of her son Jesus.

Mary knows the sword that pierces the heart of every mother, every father, every brother and sister who has someone inside a prison. She knows what it means when we hear that the vast majority of women in prison are mothers of children – at least 80 per cent of them the sole providers for dependent children. One of the themes of this Statement is the terrible impact of prison on families: children deprived of a mother or father, wives separated from their husbands, parents separated from a son or daughter.

Even though the face of the prisoner is concealed behind the walls of prison, they remain part of our society and, in many ways, reflect the standards of our society. Poverty, inequality, lack of access to education, lack of family support and lack of care for people who suffer from mental illness: all these factors make it more likely that the less fortunate will end up incarcerated instead of getting the help they need.

That is in no way to excuse criminals or to suggest that they somehow are not responsible for their actions. But it does make the point that society as a whole is also responsible for the conditions in our prisons and for the numbers of people who find themselves there.

In my pastoral rounds in Broome, I am constantly reminded of those for whom the justice system, and society as a whole, has done no service.

Six young men I visited many years ago in a cell in Broome Regional Prison took great pride in a song they had just written – ‘The Boys in Green’. Their story is in the Statement. Their song hinted that it was most certainly safer on the inside. It revealed their apprehension that what awaited them outside was more of the same sorts of things that had led them to jail in the first place.

I followed their lives for some time. Two are still in jail. One is still going in and out through the prison and justice system. Another has taken his own life, and another, aged 36, is about to be buried in Kalumburu in two weeks’ time.

I think also of a man who rushed into a house on hearing a gunshot. He found his next-door neighbour slumped over in the chair, the gun-barrel jammed at his throat. He was regarded firstly as a bit of a hero, having responded to this need, until somebody complained that jewellery from the house was missing. You see, he, who had found the body, had a criminal record. So he must have stolen the jewels. So he ended up in prison, in remand, awaiting trial. But he was a free spirit – something that had landed him in trouble in the first place. He already owed \$8000 in fines, but his Aboriginal Legal Service lawyer said to him, ‘If you plead guilty, we’ll get you just a fine. I’ll have you out of here in a couple of days.’ So he pleaded guilty to something he didn’t do and he received a \$6000 fine. So now he owes \$14,000. That money is

being taken from his social security, and he lives on \$305 a fortnight. I don't know how. Again, the prospect of imprisonment was just too much to bear. It's easier to plead guilty. I wonder how many others of our Indigenous brothers and sisters in my own country up there and perhaps throughout this nation are also suffering because they found it more expedient to plead guilty.

Another young Aboriginal man was apprehended and charged for attempting to break into Broome prison! For him, the prison facilities promised so much more than society had to offer – because in there, he was to find medical care, a square meal and a roof over his head. What on first sight appears to be the ludicrous act of an individual is in fact a sad indictment of our society – that somebody would find it better on the inside.

As citizens, we all have a responsibility to do something – to alleviate inequality, address those factors that expose people to incarceration, and to create opportunities that will ensure prison is truly a last resort.

Today, as we celebrate the Feast of the Triumph of the Cross, let us call to mind how an instrument of torture and death is transformed for us to be a sign and symbol of our faith and our hope in Christ's promise of Salvation. Our Lord was crucified a criminal. He suffered, died and was buried. On the third day he rose again. As his disciples, we are called to minister to those in need and to bring new hope to situations of hopelessness and despair. Called to build God's Kingdom in this world, let us consider the needs of those behind the walls of prison, those affected by crime, and those seeking bridges to a new life.

As it was written in the Letter to the Hebrews:

Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured (Heb. 13:3).

I sincerely thank you all very much for being here this morning. God bless you.