

**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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I was in Prison and you came to visit me. In visiting prisons I have crossed a certain threshold many times. For over 15 years I have consciously been passing through the gates of Silverwater Women's prison, formerly known as Mulawa, the principal women's prison in NSW. The prison threshold is the dividing line between outside and inside. Outside is the world we can go wherever we want, choosing the people we want to meet. It is a world of families, jobs and where we have time for relaxation. Inside everything is different. Freedom to move is restricted. The women are locked up in a small cell from 3.30 p.m. to 8 a.m., and often many times during the day as well. Inside is a world of limited contact, regulated visiting times, forced togetherness of people who otherwise would never had dreamed of sharing their living space; and it is in this kind of living space I find concentrated the misery of the world, hardship, loneliness and despair.

Time and again the question is asked, 'Who is God?' Many women feel strongly that they have not just been deserted by people but also by God. For these people God seems to be on the outside. The thick prison walls have left God outside. They feel disappointed. Perhaps God chooses only the successful. Many of the women I meet in prison feel they are not worthy of God's love. Quite often when I am with them on a one-to-one basis I experience their brokenness. They are rock bottom and helpless. I often ask them what their desire is. What do they want? Mostly they answer: to be loved. I tell them God loves them and God desires them to experience that love. I help them ponder words in scripture of God's love encouraging them to keep touching into their own desires. When they share with me what touches them, they often start to recognise themselves as human beings and then start to recognise what they have done. I encourage them to allow God to change them and to experience God's grace which is always sufficient. I have often invited inmates to take part in a Retreat In Daily Life, in which I invite some of my colleagues to companion them. Many of

them are still having ongoing Spiritual Direction each month. There is no one so bad, so far away from God, so evil, that the grace of God cannot penetrate. If we are not convinced that people can change then all our work is for nothing. If we really think that person in front of us is an image of God, is a child of God, convinced of their dignity, that is what keeps us on.

It is true that when oppression and violence threaten or destroy human dignity those who hold all human beings precious in God's eyes and are vulnerable to spiritual power within them cannot stand by, because all of us are made in the image and likeness of God. We forget that. Getting so many knocks and bruises in our life and suffering so many setbacks, feeling rejected and a failure, often feeling helpless and insignificant, we can forget that we are precious in God's eyes.

I think any mission is about being present to God and I have discovered that by spending time with someone I understand that as human beings we all suffer, some more than others, and that it is standing in solidarity with another's pain I find the presence of God. *I was in prison*. How does this statement fit into the outside world and inside world every time I cross the prison threshold? *Inasmuch as you did this to the least of these, you did it to me*. If I had to divide the world between outside and inside, then for me Jesus is definitely on the inside and with the imprisoned. As I accompany some of these women, I am more and more experiencing Christ for me. I can say that I have seen with my eyes and touched with my hands the suffering face of Christ in these, *the least of these*.

The love I feel for these women, who I believe are the poorest of the poor, God's *anawim*, loved by God (and sometimes only God), almost breaks my heart. God in these women leads me, teaches me, and takes me to a deeper place of love – if I trust that. And I do. Receiving, embracing, loving them is integral to my own wholeness. I often feel – and I have told them this – that they make me a better woman and that I often need them more than they need me. I feel that my compassion goes a little deeper and I am richer for their presence. The women do a little dance of delight when they see me. They run to me, hug me ... 'I love you', they say, and I reply, 'I love you too'. I cannot become whole if I experience myself as separate from God's *anawim*. There are often times when I sense something is not right, something is missing and I feel restless in that empty space. St Augustine says, 'We are made for God and our hearts are restless until they rest in God'. He also says, 'Peace is the way things should be'. I believe, too, that our hearts are restless until all God's people live in peace.

Most of us, thank God, are not called to live on the extreme margins of our society in order to be faithful. But all of us, at various points in our lives, are called to step out in pursuit of integrity and justice. When we do take such steps, we may find that our souls will be stretched and we will see a little clearer. Stretching is always painful, and I often found myself asking the question, particularly when I first started this ministry, 'What is this going to cost me?' But I have discovered because I am with these people, I experience little miracles from within me that nurture me and bless me with a deeper insight.

I encounter women in prison who are truly dependent on God and on each other. They live, out of desperation a curious kind of interconnectedness.

For me to choose to be with them, to be present to them, to listen to them, to experience helplessness because of them, leaves me in a different place than I was earlier in my life. My priorities changed and I experience a transforming reality, compassion. That compassion for me is to know myself connected to every creature, to experience Jesus saying 'You in me and me in you'.

Prison pastoral care is the responsibility of everyone. By bringing people into prison, the outside view can change by all working together. For over ten years I have experienced this conversion by involving people from my own parish community, at Epping and Carlingford, in a special ministry of Sunday Prayer Service in the Chapel. Their role is to gather with the inmates and generally welcome them when they arrive for the service. Following the service the inmates are invited to a morning tea prepared by these ladies. They spend time mingling, talking over assorted topics and generally enjoying the relaxation and calm at this time. Some are now well known to each other by their first names and they are able to take up continuing conversations when next they meet. In addition, over the past couple of years, these volunteer ladies spend several rostered hours on two to three days prior to Christmas and Mother's day with the inmates who may wish to create their own special cards for family and friends. I have a quarterly de-briefing meeting with these volunteers, where we go over previous attendances, iron out any perceived difficulties on organisation or planning, and set up a schedule for future visiting dates. Last year five inmates asked for Baptism and as the volunteers from my parish have been involved over many years with the RCIA program, I have asked them to walk the journey with them and as their Sponsor, continue to do so. For over 15 years my local St Vincent de Paul Conference has given Chaplaincy financial support, food vouchers and clothing. The men in the Society, on the request of the Chaplains, visit men in prison at Long Bay, Silverwater and beyond.

I would like to have volunteers from our various parish Communities and St Vincent de Paul conference and regional centres walk the journey with prisoners helping them to make informal decisions – a mentor – someone who will visit them regularly in prison and who is there to meet them at the prison gates on their release, provide basic needs like food and clothing, befriend them, help them find housing and a job, and provide spiritual support. This would be no easy task and it would require teamwork. The team should be adequately trained. There should be a team leader, a community Chaplain, who is involved in Prison Pastoral Care but working mainly on the outside. If we don't have a community, we won't have justice. Divine justice is not based on the law but love. God's justice extends beyond the law. And so should ours.

Regarding unequal justice. Yes there are enormous differences in the imprisonment rates of various Australian states and territories. But I encounter one unequal justice every day. And that is women in prison. They are disadvantaged. The very fact that approximately only ten per cent of the prison population in NSW are women, speaks of the poverty of a woman who is incarcerated. The majority of them are mothers with several children and have been abandoned by their husbands or partners. Some of them do not know who the father (or fathers) of their children are. Most likely they have never had a stable family relationship. A man in prison will usually have a woman, a wife or a mother come to visit them and on release a home to go back to. Many women do not have this. Many are abandoned. No one to visit them, no home

to go back to and no rights to their children. Often they have been used and betrayed by men for their own advantage. One example recently is a woman and her husband who were arrested and sent to prison. They had been under surveillance for a period of time. They had been married for four years and had a six-week-old baby who was being breastfed. The woman was in a state of shock. She loved her husband and as a wife would do anything for him as was expected. He was from South America. They married in Australia. They were both charged with drug trafficking. Her husband asked her regularly to meet members of his family and take them and their goods to various places. She never doubted or questioned her husband, believing that is what she should do. When arrested she told the police this who in turn showed her evidence of her husband's affairs with other women. She was devastated and crying for her baby who was taken from her. Like many others she has to prove her innocence and wait for a trial. In prison she is labelled a criminal, not someone presumed innocent.

The rate of recidivism is very high. Many women return to prison within one to two years of their release – some even earlier. Even for people who really want to stay out of prison, it is a hard decision to make that choice not to reoffend. It's tough. I have often experienced the shame of women who continually return after vowing on their previous release never to return again. For other women who have no support, no family, no housing, no money, are lonely and scared and who have become so thin and sick, deliberately commit an offence so as to come back to prison to have a roof over their head, food to eat, gain weight and have friends for company. I often hear comments about the conditions in gaol being compared to a 5 star hotel. Surely if the conditions in gaol are better than those on the outside then we must seek to lift up the outside – not drag down the inside.

We are called to act and make a difference for those who suffer. It is true the vast majority of Australians have no knowledge of prisons or prison life, or even of the high level of social and economic disadvantages that prisoners and their families experience over many generations.

In Luke's Gospel, the woman with a haemorrhage came up behind Jesus and touched the hem of his cloak. Jesus knew his own limitations and said, 'Who touched me ... somebody touched me I felt that power go out from me'. An inmate who is suffering badly puts her cuffed hand thorough a small opening in the cell door and asks me to touch her. She asks me to pray with her, a real person who identifies herself with Christ and suffers with him. Even with someone guilty of the worst possible crime I hope I will always recognise the untouchable dignity of the cry of the heart and see the face of Jesus who said of himself: 'I was in prison and you came to visit me'.