

Area: Archdiocese of Tiranë – Durrës, Albania
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Progress Report on the Prison Chaplaincy Project

1. Summary

During this year the pastoral ministry in prisons Tirana – Durres Archdiocese has continued with energy and commitment. As chaplain there has been a consistency in assisting the prisoners according to their needs and the opportunities offered but also according to the rooms created by the institution for this important work. The prisoner's need to grow spiritually is paramount but their needs for social assistance and materials are important and numerous because of the very reality in which they live. This creates a vulnerable situation for all of them.

The opportunities to help are few, this is because of the large numbers, but also in relation to the demand and the needs that they present. This may be dependent simply on physical time which they require in measures which are impossible to fulfil within the given schedule of time.

The institution continues to have problems in supporting the prisoners adequately and in responding to our presence in the prison. They lack motivation. The Institution is also not able to face the needs of prisoners as regarding their rights for minimum freedom and the exercise of their constitutional rights to spiritual assistance. They continue to treat them simply as people who must be punished and not as creatures of God who have a right to be empowered and to be released tomorrow into society with the belief and feeling that they may have a better future and live in peace.

Despite the limitations that exist, we have continued our work in all prisons of Tirana – Durres with constant presence through the Holy Mass, personal and group conversations with the prisoners, with efforts to establish contacts with their families and with support for reconciliation between themselves and their families whom they have hurt. They are offered financial assistance for legal aid with a lawyer for those who do not have the possibility of finding one and also material assistance for prisoners and their families in need.

2. Background

The current situation in the prisons of Albania is particularly bad at this time. The main reason which remains relevant and is still among us is because of the stigma laid upon them that the "prisoner = one who deserves to suffer", and not the person who needs to improve and live with dignity. Apparently, the scriptures in the time of Lent, in which God says: "I am the Lord, I do not want the death of the sinner, but I want him/her to return and live", is not part of the Institution's opinion.

Another reason is the overcrowding of the prisons because of the change of leadership and the creation of several austerity measures imposed on the citizen by the state. This country has lived in complete chaos in terms of rights and duties of the state and the citizen. Consequently a large number of families have not paid the electricity bills for some long time, due to neglect and economic impossibilities. With the change of government, the current government decided to collect these debts which the citizens owe in relation to the state. This has been a time when the population was and is still poor and therefore anyone who did not and do not have the option to pay accumulated debts, the Police has cut off the energy in the home and the head of the family has ended up in prison. Currently, in the prisons of Tirana-Durres there is an overcrowding of 15-20% as a result of this decision. This is a difficult matter because these persons in relation to crime and criminality and in terms of their nature are "innocent", but unfortunately in prison they are forced to stay in the same cell with people who have committed severe crimes of a different nature. If these people lack assistance, they risk falling into a crisis of depression and commit suicide. Unfortunately this has happened. There are some other individuals who are trained and prepared to commit crime as soon as they come out of prison (ironically the prison aims to be a reformatory institution, but it becomes a perfect school of crime). As a result of overcrowding, the human conditions become more difficult to operate. Overcrowding has caused the closure or conversion of the few places of entertainment or social work. These have become dormitories for young prisoners. The normal cells are now housing twice the number of prisoners and this crisis has also deprived the church of an environment for chaplaincy work. The support is done in the cells or corridors or in the yard or wherever there is a space for the sacraments. So with the exception of two hours of outdoor exercise in the yard, the prisoners cell is the only room where they can stay during the rest of the day and night.

3. Progress of the intervention

a) Activities for evangelism

Participation of the inmates in activities depends largely on the willingness of the prison's social workers as they need to inform the prisoners and bring them to the meeting. It also depends on the capacity of available rooms. The number of participants in a Holy Mass varies depending on the conditions. While sisters or lay persons continue the conversation in the room with prisoners I make the confessions for those who desire to come forward and talk privately. After this we continue with the celebration of the Holy Mass and then they either develop different games in a room put at our disposition for Mass or even in their cells in small groups of 4-6.

b) Activities of negotiation with families.

One of the most difficult and most necessary works is the reconciliation with families, especially for those who have committed a crime within the family. The important work is also to establish contacts with the family who visit prison to meet those who are convicted of blood feuds. In both cases, the negotiation is difficult, because it requires a lot of time but also a lot of movement and accrues heavy financial costs.

c) c) Activities of state institutions or NGOs or other religions

4. Challenges encountered during the implementation of the work

Communication and liaison work between myself and the institution social workers remains a problem because people who work with prisoners are not in the job for long. There is a need for key workers to be trained with methods of working with convicted people. These people are unfortunately not present in the prisons. Specialisation in this field is unusual in Albania. It is required but unfortunately missing.

The challenge remaining is to find spaces for meetings between prisoners and their children. Children and parents have a need for close physical contact. This need remains outside the logic of the state in their thinking behind developmental programmes for the successful treatment of a detainee.

Finally, after much work and negotiation, the state's institutions have given the possibility of creating such a room in one prison.

5. The results achieved

The prisoners expression of joy when they see we have access to the premises of the prison is a clear indication of the esteem which they themselves give to our presence in this environment.

Also the Institution leaders express how pleased they are with our work, still unpaid by the State. They see our presence as a sign and means of measuring tranquility amongst the prisoners after the meeting in the Mass or after the various activities created by this chaplaincy work.

6. Conclusions and guidance for the current year

The line of work will remain more or less the same this year. We will continue our frequent presence in the prisons through various spiritual activities such as the Mass, the Sacrament of Reconciliation, personal conversations and teamwork. We will also provide various supports in terms of their relationships and contact with their families. Creating opportunities for having a lawyer in cases where families economically are not able to afford this essential service is increasing and therefore it is foreseen that this will continue to be part of our service in the upcoming year. Providing justice for prisoners is part of the call of a chaplain when this is not provided by the state.

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