

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 the Tirana/Durres prisons has continued with commitment. As the chaplain to these prisons 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. 360 Prisoners took part in the pastoral activities who are in constant need to grow spiritually. This is the paramount work but their needs for social assistance and materials are important and numerous because of the very reality in which they live.

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

The institution continues to have problems in supporting the prisoners adequately and in responding to our presence in the prison. 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 a 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

There are 22 prisons presently operational in Albania. The space in Albanian penitentiaries has a total capacity of 4537 inmates. While there is some overcrowding of the prison population in the country, the Albanian government ameliorated the situation by opening the new facility in Elbasan. The government also implemented the new OSCE-supported probation system, and by granting amnesty to certain convicts. This led to a fall in overcrowding by 420 people.

However, during the last year the situation of overcrowding came back due to the decision of the Prime Minister of Albania to imprison every family leader who did not pay 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 very 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. 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.

A few prisoners who had been extradited from other countries said they knew the rules of the prison because of the time spent in prisons abroad. Amongst these prisoners are 7 traffickers all of whom are women.

One issue of particular concern was raised by the prisoners of Shënkoll, who reported that they were obliged to keep the lights on during the entire night. This was psychologically disturbing for all of them. Another concern is the fact that in many sites the number of smokers is high and they smoke inside the cells. This negatively affects the air quality, particularly in winter, and creates an especially unpleasant situation for non-smokers.

The situation in Fushë-Kruja was reported to be very problematic, as hot water is scarce. Inmates have to book a hot shower at least a week in advance at the communal shower section. In order to shower more often, they have secured resistance heating wires with the permission of the authorities with which they heat water in their personal bathrooms inside the cells.

While authorities reported that there are sufficient bed sheets in all sites, the majority of detainees prefer to use their own sheets brought by their families, who also launder their bedding. Inmates using the facility's bedding have the possibility to wash them once a week. There were rare cases when the prison offered mattresses, which according to the inmates were wet at all times, so everyone preferred to get them from home. The inmates had to wash their bedding by hand, and were also obliged to get washing powder and soap from outside. There were rare reports that sometimes bedding was not changed for more than one month

According to the prison authorities interviewed, the entry and exit of all types of visitors is strictly controlled, including prison authorities or external visitors. The Education sector keeps a special register of all incidents, no matter how insignificant. There have been cases where family members of inmates, especially when the inmate is newly arrived, violate the rules by bringing cash to the inmates. The families generally abide by the rules following a full explanation by prison police. However, there have been cases where family members inserted hard drugs such as heroin inside food. They were criminally prosecuted for this act. The entry and exit registers are rigorously kept per the regulation.

According to the General Regulation of Prisons exercising, prisoners should be allowed to spend two hours daily outdoors. Yet in practice, the time spent outdoors differs from one site to the other depending on the number of inmates, as well as the size of the available outdoor space.

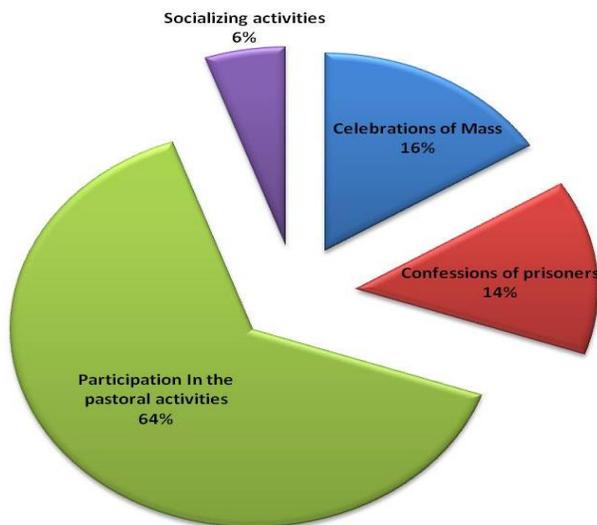
The detainees have the possibility to work only in certain detention sites.

Inmates may work in the kitchen, as cleaners, doing landscaping or clean-up work outdoors, or in the shop. They do not get paid, but are compensated with the reduction of their sentence. The majority of the detainees do not have sufficient information on the option of working or on the number of the days they can earn to reduce their sentence. Some detainees claimed that they had asked to work, because they would like to have a reduction of approximately four days of sentence per month of work, but they were not given the possibility to do so. There were unproven claims that a detainee had to pay up to 500€

as a bribe to be allowed to work in the kitchen. A considerable number of inmates say they did not have any interest in working.

3. Progress of the intervention

The pastoral work in Prisons



During this period there have been developed pastoral activities in the 9 prisons of Tirana – Durres. Participation of the inmates in activities during this time has been 360 people in Masses, Confessions, celebrations of Christmas and Easter also in 10 birthday parties. 20% of the participants have been from a different religion, mostly Muslim. The conditions for celebrating the Holy Mass continue to be challenging as in the most of the prisons there are no specified places for this ritual. In some prisons there is only a cell in disposal, due to being overcrowded. When it happens that the prisoners are moved to another prison, the chaplain follows them because of their demand to continue the relationship even when they are out of the diocese of Tirana – Durres. Due to this

a) Activities of negotiation with families.

As provided by the General Regulation of Prisons, the inmates generally receive family visits once a week. The visits last for 20 minutes. The area was very small and the room was crowded. There was one case of an inmate whose family was living abroad and could not meet him more than three to four times a year, and he has been permitted to have longer visits. There are some inmates that pay bribes to the prisons staff and retain on hour. There are some families that because of the iron bars dividing visitors and inmates, refused to meet with their children, fearing it could be traumatic.

One of the most difficult and most necessary works of the chaplain is the reconciliation with families, especially for those who have committed murder crimes. During this period 30 families are supported. 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. Sometimes the families are so poor that they are unable to visit their relatives in the prison because they cannot cover the transportation costs.

b) Assistance for Law and health support

The General Regulation of Prisons, article 5, provides for the right of the detainee to be informed of their rights and obligations inside the prison upon arrival. This information should be delivered in writing, or, if the detainee is illiterate, it may be delivered orally. Unfortunately this does not happen and the prisoners generally reported that they had not received any information upon entering the prison facility. One woman was assisted with law assistance during this period by the chaplain.

Usually, in all sites, prisoners have access to doctors 24 hours per day. When serious health problems arise, detainees are brought to regional hospitals. Some of the interviewed detainees said that they had to pay a form of bribe to doctors for every visit. The amount varies starting from 5000 ALL for a normal visit. The detainees who do not pay have to wait for a few days. Due to this many prisoners, especially those in the Zaharia (Kruja) are in very bad health conditions, especially those in need for continuous medication. 50 prisoners were supported with medication related to the illnesses of Hypertension, prostate, Spine hernia, eye sight and diabetes.

Particular concerns were raised with regard to dental services. Many inmates complained they had to pay bribes for such services. Also the material used by some dentists for filling tooth cavities was of a very low quality, thus not lasting long enough, or causing other complications. One of the worst examples was the dental clinic of Fushë- Kruja. During one of the visits it was noticed that the tools were dumped in the sink and seemed in very poor condition. The chaplain complained about this matter. They had not been used for two days and were still not sterilised. The appliances were visibly filthy. In addition, the dentist was very unwelcoming and exhibited reluctance to co-operate. The same situation is in Zaharia prison in Kruja.

Another issue is the mental health condition of the prisoners. One very problematic issue concerns people who have committed crimes but do not bear criminal responsibility due to mental health problems. Those who have been ordered by the court to receive obligatory mental health treatment are either kept in prison hospitals, or in the prison of Zaharia in Kruja. While the prison authorities try to ensure that these people receive proper medical treatment, the fact that they are kept in the prison system is a severe violation of their rights.

c) Collaboration with other entities and communities

The sisters of Mother Teresa (Missionaries of charity) and the Jesuits (The Society of Jesus) have been the only supporters, although in every meeting organized from the Catholic Church for missionaries there has been addressed the need for more chaplaincy work and chaplains to cover the needs. At the moment there are very few religious mostly parish priests who visit the prisons sometimes, and there is only one chaplain, myself, that has this mission. There has been some support in materials in kind, mattresses, personal hygiene materials, clothes, food; there is an exigent need for more chaplaincy work in the prisons of Albania. 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, 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). Spiritual direction, and not only, is a necessity especially with these cases.

Fundraising work has been done with the bookshops in Tirana for gifting books for the prisoners. The Jesuits also gave an amount of books which were delivered to the Prisons.

4. Challenges encountered during the implementation of the work

Communication and liaison work between me 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. Specialization in this field is unusual in Albania, and mostly the workers have studied for social work in the University of Tirana, but they are employed due to nepotism. This is usual in the Institutions of Albania.

The challenge remaining is that the institution workers and especially the employees in the prisons do not understand the role of the Chaplain in prisons. Sometimes the priest and the nuns are offended and unnecessary obstacles are created for them to enter into the prison.

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. The number of prisoners who suffer from depression is increasing and the assistance to them is not provided from the psychologists that are employed from the Institution.

During this period the Chaplain has been suffering from a serious illness of blood circulation. Due to this he had to go overseas to get the appropriate treatments. Although he delegated the work to many priests, only the Jesuits went there on two occasions. If there was more than one chaplain, the work would be more effective and the prisoners would be given more services

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.



- 360 prisoners are continuous participants in the pastoral activities in the 9 prisons of Tirana Durres
- 90 Holy masses celebrated
- 80 confessions conducted
- 30 socializing activities, which 10 of them were birthdays, developed
- 50 people were assisted with medical support
- 1 woman legally assisted
- Fundraising activities were developed and got a positive response

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.

- There is a need to put into place a standardized practice with regard to informing detainees of their rights, obligations and the prison's regime upon their arrival. This information should be given in writing, as provided by the secondary legislation, and supplemented by oral explanation when necessary.
- There is a need to provide central heating in all detention sites.
- All sites should provide laundry services for personal clothing of inmates. Detergents and soaps should be provided in accordance with the secondary legislation
- There is a need to properly and thoroughly investigate cases of alleged corruption in detention centers, not only with regard to the behaviour of prison administration or prison police, but particularly in the cases of medical personnel.
- There is a need to provide for proper medication of inmates in the prison system. The medication should be of a good quality and meet the needs of inmates. The same quality of treatment should be offered by dentists. Cases of alleged corruption should be properly investigated.
- People under court-ordered mental health treatment are not prisoners, but patients. They should not be detained in prisons, where they are subject to the same regime of rights and obligations as prisoners. Also prisoners who are suffering from depression have to be provided with counseling and therapy.

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