The ministry of the convicted in penitentiary institutions – mission, necessity, hope

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You are convicted, but not condemned.
Each one of you may become a saint with the help of God’s grace.
John Paul II

ABSTRACT

The oldest civilized societies already knew that the national system of safety required places of isolation for those who committed acts which violated legal order. However, none of the first legal orders considered religion to have educational impact. The most important task of every priest offering their ministry in the isolation of prison is the conversion of those deprived of freedom. The reality in which they have to work may be compared to the Tower of Babel which brings together perpetrators of various offences. A man has always been brave, heroic and courageous but also weak “errare humanum est”. Sometimes a man breaks the law in such a way that they deprive themselves of the most precious thing, i.e. freedom. Every society is subject to political and economic considerations. The teaching of the Church also includes the image and understanding of a man. John Paul II very strongly supported this idea. For him, a man was the most important fundament of social life. According to him, the democratic order could not be based solely on the compliance with the law but it also had to take into account the concept of a man, their welfare and possibilities. Despite their downfall, prisoners do not lose their inborn dignity and they remain human. Their dignity needs to be respected, although it does not mean that their humanity is disrupted. Rehabilitation should make a man rediscover themselves and experience their dignity despite the fact that they had hurt somebody. In many cases the committed crime is
irreversible, as no one is able to bring a man back to life or cure somebody who has been badly hurt. However, it does not mean that the improvement and conversion of an individual, a man, is impossible. In his teaching, John Paul II often pointed to the importance of a fundamental goodness which is present in every man. Despite a sin and an internal conflict a man cannot destroy it and, thanks to it, they are capable to differentiate between the good and the bad. The words of John Paul II, said to the convicted in the prison in Plock in 1991 during his 4th Pilgrimage to Poland, were of significant importance: “Each one of you may become a saint with the help of God’s grace”.

**Keywords:** ministry of the convicted, rehabilitation, education, the teaching of John Paul II, pedagogy of the heart

1. INTRODUCTION

The environment in which prison chaplains work may be compared to a huge Tower of Babel where perpetrators of various offences serve their sentences. A man has always been brave, heroic, courageous but also weak and vulnerable to negative influences of the environment – “errare humanum est”. Sometimes a man breaks the law in such a way that they deprive themselves of the most precious thing i.e. freedom.

The blame is not always borne by an individual but the aim of this article is not to justify criminals. We do, however, need to point out that pauperization, poverty, unemployment, inequality of educational opportunities and imperfection of law favour criminality and take the weakest, the poorest, the lost ones, the helpless, the maladjusted to the dregs of social life. The attitude towards criminals existing in the society is rather negative. The convicted are often considered to be stigmatized, worse than others. We can observe the phenomenon of social stigmatization.

People feel contempt, mistrust and unwillingness because the rules and standards generally accepted in the society have been broken and because they fear of their life and well-being. They are also afraid that one day they may become victims. It is a certain “vicious circle” in which violence and fear circle. We are afraid, therefore, we do not help. That way we leave the convicted on the dregs of social life which often leads them to commit another crime. At this point, it is worth noticing that the improvement of a convicted person is possible. The history of the penitentiary system confirms it. One of the examples is Jacques Fesh and his book “I will see Jesus in five hours”.

2. A HISTORICAL OUTLINE

The universal Church of the first centuries played a highly significant role in the improvement of the situation of prisoners. In 367, out of Christian duty, the Caesar Valentine ordered to visit prisoners and take interest in their fate.

In 549, the Council of Orleans obliged clergy to visit prisoners and offer help to them. It also adopted the resolution saying that every Sunday a parson should visit prisoners and fulfil their spiritual needs. With time, special religious congregations were established which took care of prisoners and even redeemed captives from barbaric bondage (Fig. 1).
Such concept of the early Christian support was also cultivated by the bishop of Milan, Charles Borromeo, who understood prison ministry as religious education, preaching and equipping prisons with Church literature.

In 1703, the Hospice of Saint Michael in Rome was established on the initiative of the Pope Clement XI. It was not a typical prison but rather the house of correction for boys, which offered the adequate conditions for their moral improvement. The daily routine included meditation, contemplation, Bible reading, praying, educating and participation in sacramental life. At that time, for the first time, chaplains became members of prison personnel and they were responsible for the entire program of the moral improvement of prisoners [1, 2].

It is worth pointing out that in Medieval Poland the queen, Hedwig of Silesia, famous for her piety, carried out the mission of charity work towards prisoners. Because she could not visit criminals in person, she sent her messengers with food, beverages and adequate clothing so that they would not be cold. She also took care of the change of clothes and adequate underwear so that they would not be troubled by bugs. She gave them candles so that the deep darkness of the prison would be less scary [1].
This educational care will be present in the Polish penitentiary thought for the next centuries. In 1550, Stanislaw Ocieszki, the Chancellor of the Crown, recommended that “religious education should be taught to prisoners so that their behaviour would be watched over” [26]. At this point it is also worth mentioning other opinions on this matter. The idea of helping prisoners in their moral revival crashed with the idea of “severe punishment”. At that time, in Western Europe, one of the German authors expressed the following opinion: “the chain used to cuff prisoners should be as long as the weight of the crime they committed” [16].

Stanislaw Lubomirski, the Marshal of the Crown, adopted policy of pro-religious character. In 1767, a Marshal prison was established in Warsaw, however, it functioned only to the last partition of Poland. The right to permanent religious support established there became the fundamental right to religious freedom. It was exercised by the organization of services during religious festivals and on Sundays, regular confessions and permanent religious ministry. The regulations gave prisoners the right to religious practices and the contact with a man of the cloth who would offer help and spiritual support. The chapel in the Marshal prison is regarded to be the first one existing in the penitentiary system. It was hallowed on 26th September 1783 and religious ministry was run by the Capuchins.

In the 18th century Europe John Howard, the English prison inspector, favoured the humanitarian administration of punishment, i.e. in a prison cell. During his inspections he came to the conclusion that the optimal way to impact prisoners is through education [15, 17].

Teachers, to a large extent, were selected among men of the cloth. Therefore, it needs to be acknowledged that education in prisons was based on the Bible which was the most popular and accessible educational tool at that time.

In his book “Panoptic on, penitentiary system”, published in 1791, Jeremy Bentham, one of the innovators of the penitentiary system, based his penitentiary program on moral and religious improvement achieved in the isolation of a prison cell. He is also the author of the idea of building prisons according to the fan system, i.e. in such a way that it was possible to watch all cells of the prison from one place. Therefore, it was possible to monitor the behaviour of prisoners who were reading religious texts or contemplating [25].

The period of the partitions did not favour the establishment of adequate religious relations. The most favourable situation was in the Kingdom of Poland where the document which discussed the problem of the penitentiary system and pointed to religious exercises as the tool to achieve moral improvement came to life. Prisoners had to attend religious services and practices. The day started with a morning prayer followed by the holy mass and it was obligatory to listen to the preaching and catechization.

Important changes happened in the Russian partition after 1867 when the Russian dynasty of Romanov recognized religious ministry as a very precious form of penitentiary impact. It was, however, implemented by Orthodox priests in Russian. Greek Catholic priests were not allowed in prisons and chapels were exchanged for Eastern Orthodox churches. Only after 1905 the tolerance ukase, introduced by Tsar Nikolaus II, made it possible to reactivate the religious activity of Greek Catholic and Uniate priests [32].

In the Prussian partition, religious ministry was regulated by the penitentiary ordinance from 1898 which allowed prisoners, in the situation when the circumstances were favourable, to follow religious practices. In Prussian prisons there was a practice of bishops visiting criminals. In the Austrian Partition, believers of different religions had the right to religious practices and ministry. In Lviv, in the Brygidiki prison, holy mass was celebrated in the chapel on Sunday and during religious festivals. Prisoners from other penitentiary institutions were
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transported to the Brygidki prison to attend the mass. Political prisoners also had the right to attend it [13]. A year after regaining independence in 1919, Jozef Pilsudski included in his decree the disposition which pointed to the importance of religious impact on the process of improvement of prisoners. The necessity of signing employment contracts between chaplains and prison wardens was also acknowledged. In the interwar period, the most numerous religious group among prisoners, apart from Catholics, were the followers of Judaism and Orthodoxy. The timetable of religious festivals and ritual ceremonies of different religions was established internally in each penitentiary institution [9].

Polish chaplains gained a particularly important position in 1926. Later, in 1931, when chaplains became members of prison personnel, followers of practically all religions were allowed contact with the men of the cloth. Chaplains gained the right to teach religious education based on the model used by school teachers [35].

Just before the outbreak of the Second World War the penitentiary regulations of 26th July 1939 confirmed the necessity and the presence of chaplains in prisons. However, due to the outbreak of war, they were not introduced [36].

The outbreak of war, to a great extent, changed the situation. On the Polish grounds incorporated to the Nazi Germany and on the area of the General Government the activity of priests in prisons was, to a large extent, limited. Religious ministry became a conspiracy. It was often run by priests who were also imprisoned. Many chaplains who had run ministry before the war shared the fate of Poles imprisoned in the German concentration camps or the Russian atrocities. Priests sporadically administered the last rites.

The situation of prisons on the territory under the occupation of Russia was even worse after 17th September 1939. The Russians completely held the work of chaplains in prisons due to the communist ideology and anti-Polish policy directed towards the Catholic religion. The aim of the Russian occupation was to destroy the Polish nation, especially the intellectual elite which had always been attached to the Catholic tradition. The NKVD officers, who represented communist views, were in charge of prisons. The majority of chaplains were imprisoned in camps or executed. After 1946, priests and chaplains with pre-war or Home Army history were slowly eliminated. Only carefully selected monks were allowed to run limited religious ministry. Chaplains associated with the Home Army, Gwardia Ludowa or army chaplains as well as chaplains associated with so called “priests – patriots” ran the ministry [28].

Several dozen years later, on 17th September 1981, the Minister of Justice published the ordinance which, to a large extent, changed the situation of prison ministry. Priests, appointed by bishops, were allowed to enter prisons, celebrate Holy mass on Sunday and during religious festivals and give sacraments [25]. As the response to this permission, parsons of parishes where penitentiary institutions were located very quickly organized religious support. The introduction of the martial law on 13th December 1981 did not end all the effort. On the contrary, the need of religious support was greater than ever.

At that time, the religiosity of the imprisoned, especially the interned, undoubtedly increased. After 1981, the priest Jan Sikorski, appointed to take care of the interned, began to slowly reconstruct prison ministry in Poland. He was appointed for this position by the Minister of Justice in October 1990. His religious activity was of paramount importance for the position of priests in prisons on international and national scale. It initiated a new phase of spiritual and religious life in Polish prisons. In 1990, in times of socio-political transformation, the first seminar of prison chaplains was organized and about 100 people attended it. In his speech delivered at the opening of the seminar, Pawel Moczydlowski, the General Director of the
Prison Service, said the following words: “I want to say that the Church enters the walls of prisons and penitentiary system permanently. This cannot be reversed. And one more thing, the Church does not need prisons, it is us that need the Church in our work. We expect your support. What is more, prisoners count on it, but not only them. Your support is also awaited by the officers of the penitentiary system. Many a times, they showed that for them the Church is what a mother is to a child” [18], [35].

In 1990, the position of a chaplain-in-chief of the Orthodox Church, Evangelical-Augsburg Church and Roman Catholic Church was introduced. They are all members of the Council of Prison Ministry.

On 28th July 1993, in the provisions of the concordat signed between the Polish government and the Holy See, in accordance with the article 17 of the concordat, the Polish government was obliged to create adequate conditions for religious practices and the use of religious ministry by the imprisoned. The participation in the holy mass on Sunday and during religious festivals, catechization and church retreats as well as individual religious ministry was also made possible [14].

3. THE TEACHING OF JOHN PAUL II

Every community is subject to political and economic considerations. The teaching of the Church also includes the image and understanding of a man. John Paul II very strongly supported this idea. For him, a man was the most important fundament of social life. According to him, the democratic order could not be based solely on the compliance with the law but it also had to take into account the concept of a man, their welfare and possibilities. Despite their downfall, prisoners do not lose their inborn dignity and they remain human. Their dignity needs to be respected, although it does not mean that their humanity is disrupted.

Rehabilitation should make a man rediscover themselves and experience their dignity despite the fact that they had hurt somebody. In many cases the committed crime is irreversible. However, it does not mean that the improvement and conversion of an individual, a man, is impossible. In his teaching, John Paul II often pointed to the importance of a fundamental goodness which is present in every man. Despite a sin and an internal conflict a man cannot destroy it and, thanks to it, they are capable to differentiate between the good and the bad.

John Paul II said the following words to the imprisoned in the prison in Brussels: "We know that every human being, a man and a woman, may be led astray or dragged from a straight path of their own conscience and, in the case of believers, from the path outlined by God in the ten commandments given to Moses or by Jesus in the Gospel. This departure hurts the dignity of a man or even distorts it which harms others. However, this dignity is not entirely destroyed. One can always find their strength and glow. The secret of a human being is unmeasurable. The victory of the spirit over the matter, the instinct, the bad is always possible” [14].

For John Paul II prison is only a physical sign of weakness of a man. The real threat for every man is a sin which is the source of evil.

During his 4th Pilgrimage to Poland he said the following words in Plock: "My mission is to remind people, especially those who are in need, that they were created in God’s image. My mission is to preach that God is full of mercy and Jesus Christ was merciful especially towards publicans and sinners. We all know that as the response to the love of Jesus publicans and harlots gave themselves to Him and found hope even if they had been in great despair. I am
the servant of Christ and the minister of God’s secrets and I come to you in His name. Therefore, I kindly ask you, the way I asked many other people, don’t be afraid to open your hearts to Him, believe in His love. The worst prison would be a closed heart and the greatest evil – despair” [3]. Therefore, on the spiritual and natural level, a man, with the help of others, can always come back to life by making an effort of internal transformation and conversion. Evil does exist, we are all aware of it. Its existence in life of a man and in social life cannot become the source of despair and hopelessness. A man should make an effort to overcome a sin in their own conscience, heart and behaviour.

In his encyclical „Sollicitudo rei socjalis” John Paul II speaks in the following way: “The Church places its trust in a man despite the fact that it is aware of man’s iniquity. It knows that, despite the original sin and a sin that can be committed by anyone, there are certain attributes and energy in every man, there is fundamental goodness because a man was created in God’s image and because they are under the redemptive influence of Christ who somehow united with every man and because the action of the Holy Spirit fills the Earth. Therefore, there are no grounds for despair, pessimism and passivity” [20].

4. CHAPLAIN’S MISSION

Religious practices increase a sense of group solidarity. E. Durkheim proves that an individual will refrain from committing a crime if this is against the interest of the group which they strongly identify themselves with (Figs 1 & 2).

Fig. 2. Chaplain’s mission in church
Source: Prison and priestin in cell number-8 (Google).
By placing themselves in a given community, identifying themselves with it and feeling that they are its integral part, a man will not take any actions against the group because it would also be directed against themselves. Therefore, a wrong-doer would become a victim of their own offence.

When discussing E. Durkheim’s views J. Szacki comes to the conclusion that religious cult can help in the integration of a social group. When people who are deprived of freedom and who identify themselves with religious groups experience something emotional and personal, they feel a stronger bond with the religious group and experience a sense of distinctiveness from other groups. This favours conformist behaviour and, to a great extent, limits dysfunctional sphere and behaviour [8].

Every man has the right to freedom of conscience and religion and to the participation in religious rites. This is guaranteed by the constitution [34].

The freedom of religion includes freedom of belief, the right to change religion and to manifest this religion in teaching, practice, worship and observance either alone or in community with others and in public or private. The freedom of religion also includes the right to erect sanctuaries and other places of cult depending on the needs of believers and the right to resort to religious support [7].

Every prisoner has the right to religious practices, religious ministry and to attend services in prisons during religious festivals or to listen to them via mass media. They also have the right to possess books, journals and object of religious character [33]. The right to religious practices is also regulated by the international law, i.e. the Universal Declaration of Human Rights signed on 10th December 1948: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion;
this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance” [12].

This rule is conditioned by the international norms on serving prison sentence. In Polish prisons it is mainly implemented by the activity of prison chaplains whose fundamental task is to fulfil religious needs of the convicted [32].

The Catholic Church remains an absolute guarantor of the freedom of conscience and religion. It is reflected in many articles and polemics: “Guarding and supporting infrangible human rights is the very obligation of every state authority” [11].

Through equal rights and with other adequate tools, the state authority should support the freedom of religion of all citizens. It should set out good conditions for the development of religious life so that citizens can truly exercise religious rights, fulfil religious obligations and enjoy justice and peace which arise from faithfulness of a man to God and His Holy Will [7], [9].

K. Linowski points out that religious ministry offered by clergy serves two functions. The first one is preaching the Word of God and saying mass, the second, therapeutic, involves providing comfort and support to the imprisoned. We can say that a chaplain is a person from the outside of the system. He is the authority and provides a sense of security to the convicted. By visiting prisoners, he gives them an assurance that they were not excluded from the religious community and that their freedom was only limited. Such attitude gives them comfort [32].

The awareness that they belong to the community has a religious and correctional meaning and it leads to the change of personality of the imprisoned. Through the activity of a chaplain and his lay helpers, new values are introduced to the world of prison and they, unquestionably, enhance the correctional process.

Prison chaplains are great allies of educators in penitentiary institutions [6].

The studies on religious practices conducted in the USA by S. Mohanty revealed a very low crime rate among small and closed communities such as, e.g., Mormons. Among the members of religious groups; Jews show lower crime rate than Christians and among Christians; Protestants show lower crime rate that Catholics [31].

Apart from being a prison chaplain, a priest also plays a role of an animator and a moderator of religious life in prison. As an educated person he is adequately prepared and as a monopolist he provides religious ministry. He also meets religious expectations of the convicted and prison personnel [28-30].

Prison chaplains also try to prepare the convicted to fully attend the holy mass, the confession and religious festivals. Through their ministry, they increase the religious awareness of the imprisoned. They also provide information on the current events in life of the Church and they organize religious meetings such as Christmas or Easter celebration. The pastoral role of a chaplain is of fundamental importance. Preaching the Word of God in the isolation of prison meets difficulties which are either caused by prisoners or do not depend on them. The imprisoned often don’t have any religious routine and, therefore, their vulnerability towards evangelization is smaller than of people at liberty.

The presence of chaplains became a permanent fixture in the penitentiary system in Poland. Their role is often limited to the following services:

✓ pastoral role – the aim is to preach the Word of God, to offer sacraments and to moderate and animate religious life in prison,
 correctional role – the aim is to have educational and therapeutic impact on prisoners, to provide role models as an instrument to fight against the prison subculture and to animate cultural and educational life,

 organizational and integration role – chaplains as members of prison personnel, as the organizers of charity life in prison, as the link between a parish and the outside world, as the link with the language and culture in the case of foreign prisoners.

 Preaching the Word of God most often takes the form of sermons. They should be short and they should reflect on what has been read from the Bible or on the situation of prisoners in the context of their tendency to sin, the consequence of which is their imprisonment. Sermons are often based on the imprisonment of Jesus, disciples and the men of the Old Testament. This topic wins the prisoner’s attention to a greater extent than other Evangelical motives. The imprisoned identify themselves with these characters to such extent that they free themselves from their sins [21-23].

 Religious ministry in penitentiary institutions and custody centres in the second half of 90s took the form of various ministerial activities. Chaplains, supported by clerics, nuns, youth and volunteers, undertook the activities similar to the activities of parishes outside the prison. The following activities were undertaken in penitentiary institutions: church retreats, Biblical courses, pilgrimages to holy places, theatrical meetings, swimming lessons, Bible readings, meeting of prisoners with school goers. Information on the time, place and a manner of religious ministry were included in a penitentiary itinerary. At times the activities of chaplains were atypical and unconventional but they were very successful. Chaplains engaged in rehab activities, charity, cultural, educational and sport activities. The priest Jerzy Wozniak CM undertook an interesting activity in the custody center in Krakow i.e. teaching foreign languages. At the moment, religious ministry in penitentiary institutions and custody centers is offered by the representatives of the following churches and religious groups: Roman Catholic Church, Autocephalous Church, Orthodox Church, Greek Orthodox Church, the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession, the Pentecostal Church, the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, the Baptist Union, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Evangelical Reform Church, the Polish Catholic Church, the Church of Christ, the Old Catholic Church of Mariavites, Gideons Association, the Society of Krishna Consciousness, the Brunstad Christian Church, the Church of God in Christ, the Brahm Kumaris World Spiritual University.

 M. Pietrzak gives the number of the registered with the Denomination Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration of Churches and Religious Groups. Out of 139 registered religious groups 18 has their representatives offering religious ministry in Polish prisons [27].

 The representatives of Biblical Associations and the Jehovah’s Witnesses visit all penitentiary institutions in Poland. The activity of the Jehovah’s Witnesses is based on material support of the imprisoned and their families. The Pentecostal Church provide financial support for social re-adaptation of the released from prison and they also offer financial help to their families. They organize concerts, meetings with families and they run prevention activities against addictions and addiction treatment.

 Chaplain, as a person from the outside world who has a formal social authority could become a specific link between a closed prison community and a normal social environment. However, violence still exists in today’s world. Every day there is news on murderers and crimes. Sometimes offenders come from respected homes and schools who did not cause any
problems at school. We hear about young offenders who, incapable of repentance and mercy, bully a passer-by because they didn’t like their look. We hear about teachers and parents who cannot understand or believe that a quiet student committed a violent act and often doesn’t know why they did it. All those growing signals may indicate the underdevelopment of higher feelings caused by the lack of healthy nourishment that a young man needs so much i.e. love, religion and the presence of both parents who take care of them.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The entire society and every individual need to do their best to make the convicted abandon the wrong path, renew their morality and come back to religion. The Christian religion believes that the source of evil lies in the abuse of freedom by an individual and the society. Every person is capable of a sin and crime, heroism and noble deeds. Hope that comes from the Christian religion makes us see a sparkle of goodness in every man, even a criminal. This sparkle may become a reason for the transformation of those who wander. Therefore, it is possible to assume that evil and hostility can be undone. Unfortunately every man has a tendency to sin and to do evil acts. This should be remembered especially by those who uphold the law and justice and work directly with wrong doers.

The history of the penitentiary system has witnessed a lot of attempts at improving prisoners morally through religious activities undertaken by religious groups, congregations and churches. Their activity and ideas added to the change of the way prisoners and people deprived of their freedom were dealt with. Apart from the postulate of the punishment and repression, there was an emergence of the belief that a man is able to revive morally even if they committed the most terrible crime.

Today’s reality calls for civic society in which people will act together and share responsibility. There is a lot of aggression in today’s world. We lack the L vitamin – the vitamin of love. Without it we will not know how to love. Love will disappear. Emotional illiteracy means that young people are not taught how to love and do good.

A man is not only the victim of a crime but also of themselves. They are the victim of their own activity, e.g. drug and alcohol abuse, gambling, forces of nature, calamities, wars as well as political, religious and racist activities.

Religious ministry became a permanent fixture in Polish prisons and is a very important tool used to influence prisoners. The words of John Paul II, said to the convicted in the prison in Plock in 1991 during his 4th Pilgrimage to Poland, were of significant importance: “You are convicted but not condemned. Each one of you may become a saint with the help of God’s grace” [4, 5].

The support provided to prisoners and people leaving the prison evokes mixed feeling in the Polish society. It is very easy to come across very negative opinions. People who serve very long sentences find it difficult to come back to normal life. At the beginning of a new life they need the support of others. It is hard for them to find employment as during their stay in prison the work conditions and the requirements have changed and new technologies have been applied. All this makes the beginning of their new life very problematic. Moreover, employers are afraid to hire people with such history. It may seem that resting hope in chaplains and religious practices in such conditions does not make any sense. The world of prison works by informal rules and the religious norms are dominated by the human norms.
This can also be confirmed by the studies conducted by J. Malec who came to the conclusion that prison personnel does not observe major changes in the behaviour and the awareness of prisoners under the influence of chaplains. In fourteen penitentiary institutions the personnel did not observe any change at all, in five the changes were minimal and in three it was difficult to make an assessment [19, 24].

Working on spiritual level with such community is not easy. Only a small percent of prisoners is interested in religious practices and sacraments. Such attitude often results from a complicated life prisoners had at liberty. The majority of them, however, actively participate in Christmas and Easter celebration organized by chaplains.

Internal transformation is a very long, difficult and mysterious process. Prisoners and people leaving prison need to be provided with any support possible because Jesus assured us that only God knows what’s in the heart of a man.

References


