

# Remember Me: A Catholic Approach to Criminal Justice

## Call to Action Guide



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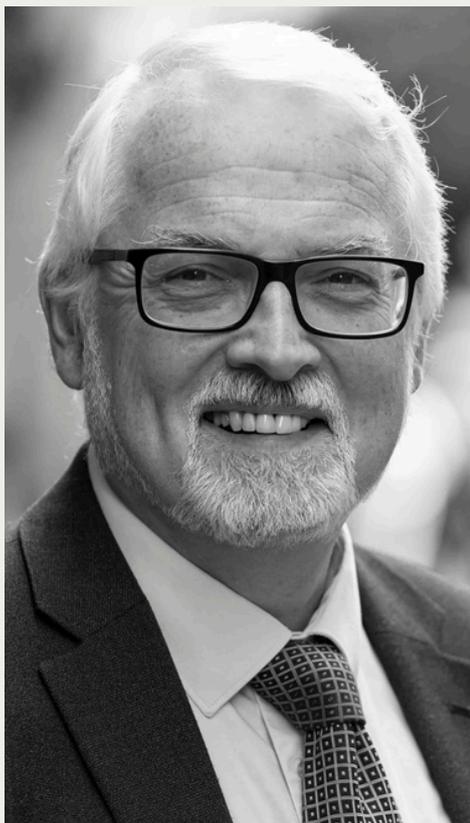
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# Foreword

At the heart of Catholic Social Teaching lies the conviction that every person, created in the image and likeness of God, possesses an intrinsic dignity that no crime, suffering, or failure can erase. In the criminal justice system, this truth is often obscured by systemic challenges, yet the reality is far more complex. Many who offend have first been victims themselves: of poverty, neglect, violence, or social exclusion. Likewise, victims of crime carry wounds that can lead to isolation, anger, and despair. The lives of victims and offenders are often intertwined, each revealing the deep fractures within our society that cry out for healing.

Crime is not only a personal failing but a communal one, a sign that relationships have broken down and that human dignity has been violated. The response, therefore, must be one of restoration and encounter. As Pope Francis wrote in *Evangelii Gaudium*, we are called to a “culture of encounter” where “no one is excluded,” and where even the most broken relationships can begin to heal.

The Church, through her parishes, schools, and charities, is uniquely placed to witness to this hope. She is called to bring mercy where there has been harm, accompaniment where there has been abandonment, and reconciliation where there has been rupture. This reflection is a call to prayer and discernment. It is an invitation for individuals and parishes to ask where they feel called to serve in this ministry of justice and compassion. Some may be drawn to support prisoners or their families; others to stand alongside victims, or to advocate for reforms that uphold human dignity and foster rehabilitation.



The work of justice is not separate from the work of mercy. When we uphold the dignity of both victim and offender, we bear witness to the Gospel truth that no one is beyond the reach of grace. My hope is that this reflection encourages us to see the criminal justice system not as a place of condemnation, but as a field of mission, where the Church’s call to love, forgive, and restore can transform both hearts and structures.

May we continue to build a society where justice restores rather than punishes, where mercy heals the wounds of both victim and offender, and where every person can begin again.

**Raymond Friel**

CEO, Caritas Social Action Network





# Addressing the root causes of offending

To reduce pressure on the justice system, we must recognise that crime is both a personal and structural problem. Addressing it requires tackling root causes such as poverty, addiction, family fragility, and youth isolation, while also affirming personal responsibility. Parishes, schools, and charities play a vital role in early intervention and accompaniment, helping individuals make positive choices. True rehabilitation depends on both personal transformation and the renewal of social conditions that uphold human dignity.

*People who live in more deprived areas are more likely to live in neighbourhoods with higher crime rates. 25.0% of people living in the most deprived neighbourhoods live in the 10% of neighbourhoods with the highest crime rates. This compares with only 3.1% of people in the least deprived neighbourhoods.*  
Health.org.uk (2025)

## Tackling Poverty and Inequality

Poverty remains one of the strongest predictors of offending, with many families forced to rely on food banks and charitable aid. As we seek to address policy and structural issues in our society through advocacy and campaigns, our parishes in the short term must seek to support and empower people in meeting their everyday material needs. Parishes should continue to work with local communities to alleviate hardship by:

- **Campaigning for just policies that address the root causes of poverty and lift families out of hardship.**
- **Working collaboratively on local initiatives with churches and charities from all denominations such as food banks clothing collections, debt support, and family hubs.**
- **Parishioners supporting employment schemes and job advice through training, placements, particularly those who are able to provide this through their own business or work backgrounds.**
- **Parishes can confidently signpost those in need to local charities and support services they do not already provide, ensuring this information is easily accessible to newcomers and parishioners alike.**

## *Responding to Addiction*

Drug and alcohol misuse is a major factor in offending, particularly among young people. County Lines networks and social media have increased accessibility and appeal, often leading to violence. Parishes can help by:

- Use parish spaces such as halls and offices as community hubs for support groups like Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), offering safe and welcoming environments for individuals seeking help and connection.
- Confidently signpost those vulnerable to alcohol and substance misuse to appropriate charities and support networks and encourage engagement with relevant health services where needed.
- Provide pastoral care for children, partners, and families affected by addiction through parish youth groups, Catholic school support, or external charities, ensuring their wellbeing and helping to break cycles of harm and offending.

## *Supporting Marriage & Family Life*

Family instability can heighten vulnerability to offending. The Church, committed to the sanctity of marriage and family life, can strengthen families by:

- Provide marriage preparation courses and ongoing formation rooted in faith and practical life skills, helping couples enter marriage with confidence and understanding. Further provision can be given to give opportunities for reflection and renewal.
- Create family-friendly parish events (e.g., shared meals, family Masses,) that help families feel integrated into the parish community as well as providing safe, welcoming spaces for children and parents (e.g., toddler groups, parenting courses, family prayer sessions).
- Establish pastoral support groups for families facing challenges such as separation, bereavement, infertility, caring responsibilities, or money issues. Signpost these families to charities that can provide counselling, relationship support and resources.
- Support single-parent families with practical help (childcare, meals, inclusion in parish life)

### *Supporting Young People*

In recent decades, gang violence and knife crime have risen sharply, increasingly drawing in younger people. Many are driven by a misplaced search for belonging, recognition, and community, needs that criminal networks exploit. County Lines operations and social media deepen these cycles of exploitation and offending. With its wide network of schools and parishes, the Church is uniquely placed to meet young people where they are, offering authentic community, purpose, and hope rooted in love and solidarity.

- **Expand and strengthen parish youth groups to offer young people a sense of belonging, positive role models, and a safe alternative to gang involvement.**
- **Continue raising awareness of gang and knife crime through parish events, homilies, and community outreach, ensuring young people and families are informed and supported.**
- **Sustain collaboration with organisations such as Street Pastors and local outreach groups to engage directly with people on the streets and help prevent situations that could lead to violence.**
- **Promote education in Catholic schools about the dangers and realities of gang involvement and knife crime, while ensuring safeguarding measures against child exploitation remain robust and consistently applied.**

Addressing the root causes of offending requires recognising that offenders are often themselves victims of deprivation and disadvantage. The link between poverty and crime is stark: a quarter of those in the most deprived areas live amid the highest crime rates, compared with only 3% in the least deprived [1]. The line between victim and offender is often blurred, both shaped by the same social and economic injustices that demand our collective response.

[1] See: Prison Reform Trust, Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile (February 2024) p. 36.



# Upholding dignity within and beyond the prison system

The treatment of prisoners shapes both outcomes and the moral health of the justice system. Catholic Social Teaching affirms that every person, including those who offend, possesses inviolable dignity. This must be the guiding principle of criminal justice: shaping its means, such as prisons and rehabilitation, and its ultimate goal: restoring right relationships after the rupture of crime. While the Church cannot solve overcrowding or court delays, it can witness to mercy, justice, and the centrality of human dignity.

## Protecting Dignity in the Prison System

Two-thirds of UK prisons are classed as overcrowded, leading to dehumanising conditions. Catholic communities can help protect dignity through:

- Advocating for more day-release and open prisons for low-risk offenders to reduce reoffending.
- Promoting restorative justice and forgiveness through the work of prison chaplains and mentors.
- Supporting alternatives to custodial sentences, especially for women, through advocacy and collaboration with local MPs and charities.

“The nature and application of penal sanctions must be such as to guarantee the rightly invoked security of society, but without attacking the dignity of man, beloved of God and called to redeem himself if guilty. The sentence must not shatter this hope of redemption”

Pope John Paul II, Address to the National Association of Magistrates on Contemporary Role of the Judiciary (2000) 6



# UPHOLDING DIGNITY WITHIN AND BEYOND THE PRISON SYSTEM

## Restorative Justice and Human Rights

Overcrowding and underfunding have eroded human dignity in many institutions. The Church must be a voice for dignity by:

- Strengthening advocacy against unjust punishment and promoting fair, humane treatment.
- Encouraging parishes to live out forgiveness and mercy in action.
- Promoting national prayer efforts for the dignity of all prisoners.
- Directing collections to fund counsellors, chaplains, and pastoral support for those in prison.
- Holding policymakers accountable for justice standards.
- Offering training for prison staff in dignity-centred justice.

## Rehabilitation and Reintegration

Properly supported prisoners are less likely to reoffend and more likely to rebuild their lives. We can:

- Maintain and expand prison chaplaincy, which supports emotional and spiritual health.
- Encourage individuals to volunteer with PACT and similar charities, offering mentoring, education, and practical support.
- Advocate for rehabilitation-focused reform that restores individuals to community and family life.

“Respect for human dignity must serve not only to limit arbitrariness and the excesses of the agents of the State, but act as a guiding criterion for the prosecution and punishment of those actions which represent the most serious attacks against the dignity and integrity of the human person”

Pope Francis, Address to the Delegates of the International Association of Penal Law (2014) Conclusion.



# Healing, Restoration, and Family Support

A truly Christian response to crime must also care for victims, families, and communities. Justice without mercy cannot heal wounds; the Church is called to minister to all who suffer.

## Supporting Prisoners

### Post-Release

Ex-prisoners often face stigma, unemployment, and homelessness, increasing the risk of reoffending. Parishes can:

- Maintain chaplaincy links after release, providing mentorship and guidance.
- Support community centres that offer safe spaces and job advice.
- Encourage parishioners who own businesses to provide employment or training.
- Strengthen parish ties with prison chaplains to help reintegrate prison leavers into community life.
- Foster parish teaching on restorative justice and forgiveness to promote acceptance.

## Accompanying Victims

The Church must ensure victims of crime are treated with sensitivity and respect. Parishes can:

- Signpost victims to charities offering mental health, domestic abuse, and financial support.
- Use parish spaces for support groups or create new ones.
- Encourage access to Catholic counsellors and discern the creation of a mental health support register.

## Supporting Families of Offenders

Families, especially children, of those in prison face stigma and hardship, often increasing their risk of future offending. Parishes can:

- Continue youth and family ministries to reach vulnerable families.
- Encourage and facilitate family visits to maintain relationships and reduce reoffending.



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# Ecumenical Action

When supporting victims and people with convictions, the Church can draw inspiration from successful ecumenical and interfaith initiatives promoting restorative justice.

The **Alpha in Prison** course runs in over 50% of prisons, providing safe spaces for inmates to explore faith and belonging, whilst experiencing a renewed sense of hope.

- [alpha.org.uk/prisons](http://alpha.org.uk/prisons)

**The Welcome Directory** is a multi-faith, national directory connecting prison leavers with faith communities near prisons, allowing for supported transitions back into society. More Catholic Churches, particularly in areas near prisons, need to sign up to the scheme and support prisoners following release.

- [www.welcomedirectory.org.uk](http://www.welcomedirectory.org.uk)

**Prisoners' Sunday** marks the first day of **Prisons Week**: an ecumenical week designated for prayer, advocacy and standing in solidarity with our brothers and sisters who have convictions. Prisoners' Sunday provides an opportunity to reflect on the work that goes on around the country within prisons and in communities, whilst also highlighting what can still be done to support all those affected.

Such ecumenical and interfaith collaboration demonstrates the power of unity in supporting the wellbeing and spiritual care of people with convictions. Restorative justice must remain a priority for the Church's mission of mercy and reconciliation.

## **CSAN Member Charities working with prisoners, families and the wider Criminal justice system**

### **ADDICTION SERVICES**

Caritas Diocese of Hallam  
Caritas Diocese of Salford  
Nugent  
women@thewell  
Your Place

### **YOUNG PEOPLE AND FAMILY SERVICES**

Cardinal Hume Centre  
Caritas Diocese of Hallam  
Caritas Diocese of Plymouth  
Caritas Diocese of Portsmouth  
Caritas Diocese of Salford  
Caritas Diocese of Shrewsbury  
Caritas Jersey  
Caritas Westminster  
Catholic Care (Caritas Leeds)  
Catholic Children's Society (Westminster)  
Daughters of Charity Services  
Depaul UK  
Father Hudson's Caritas  
Institute of Our Lady of Mercy  
Marriage Care  
Million Minutes  
Nugent  
PACT (Prison Advice and Care Trust)  
SVP (Saint Vincent de Paul Society)  
St Elizabeth's Centre  
SJOG (St John of God Hospitaller Services)  
Young Christian Workers

**COUNSELLING SERVICES**

Caritas Westminster

**CRIMINAL JUSTICE SERVICES**

Irish Chaplaincy

Out There

PACT (Prison Advice and Care Trust)

Your Place

**POVERTY SERVICES**

Cardinal Hume Centre

Caritas Diocese of Portsmouth

Caritas East Anglia

Caritas Jersey

Caritas Southwark

Caritas Westminster

Daughters of Charity Services

Depaul UK

Nugent

SVP (Saint Vincent de Paul Society)

St Anthony's Centre for Church and Industry

St Elizabeth's Centre

SJOG (St John of God Hospitaller Services)

The Passage

**SUPPORTED HOUSING SERVICES**

Caritas Diocese of Salford

Catholic Care

Depaul UK

Father Hudson's Caritas

SVP (Saint Vincent de Paul Society)

St Elizabeth's Centre

SJOG (St John of God Hospitaller Services)

The Medaille Trust

The Passage

Your Place