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Audience with Staff of the “Regina Coeli” Correctional Facility, Rome

At 12.20 this afternoon, in the Paul VI Hall, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the staff of the “Regina Coeli” Correctional Facility, Rome, and gave the following address:

Address of the Holy Father

I am pleased to meet you and I greet you all cordially, starting from the chaplain, Fr. Vittorio Trani, and the director, Dr. Silvana Servi, whom I thank for their words. You represent the working community that places itself at the service of the detainees in the Roman “Regina Coeli” Prison: guards, administrative personnel, doctors, educators, chaplains and volunteers, accompanied by your family members. I express to each one of you my acknowledgement and that of the Church for your work alongside the detainees: this requires inner strength, perseverance and awareness of the specific mission to which you are called. And another thing. It takes prayer every day, that the Lord may give you good sense: good sense in the different situations in which you will find yourselves.

The prison is a place of pain in the dual sense of punishment and suffering, and has a great need for attention and humanity. It is a place where all, Penitentiary Police, chaplains, educators and volunteers, are called to perform the difficult task of tending to the wounds of those who, on account of the errors they have made, find themselves deprived of their personal freedom. It is well known that good collaboration between the different prison services provides an action of great support in the re-education of detainees. However, due to a lack of personnel and chronic overcrowding, this painstaking and delicate work risks being in part in vain. Workplace stress caused by pressing shifts and often distance from families are factors that weigh down a job that already involves a certain psychological burden. Therefore, professional figures such as yours need personal balance and valid motivations, continually renewed; indeed, you are called not only to guarantee the protection, order and security of the institute, but also very often to bind the wounds of men and women you meet on a daily basis in their sections.

No-one may condemn another for the errors he has committed, nor inflict suffering that offends human dignity.

Prisons need to be increasingly humanized, and it is painful instead to hear that very often they are considered to be places of violence and illegality, where human evil rages. At the same time, we must not forget that many detainees are poor people, without points of reference, they have no security, they have no family, they have no means to defend their own rights, they are marginalized and abandoned to their destiny. For society, detainees are uncomfortable individuals, they are rejects, a burden. This is painful, but the collective subconscious leads us there.

But experience shows that prison, with the help of prison workers, can truly become a place of redemption, of resurrection and of change of life; and everything is possible through paths of faith, work and professional formation, but above all with spiritual closeness and compassion, following the example of the Good Samaritan, who stooped to care for his wounded brother. This attitude of closeness, that finds its root in Christ's love, may favour in many detainees the trust, awareness and certainty of being loved.

In addition, a punishment, any punishment, must not be closed; it must always have "the window open" to hope, on the part of both the prison and of each person. Everyone must always have the hope of partial rehabilitation. Let us think of those serving life sentences, even for them: "With my work in prison...". Give, do work... Always the hope of rehabilitation. A penalty without hope is useless, it does not help, it provokes in the heart feelings of rancour, very often of revenge, and the person leaves worse than when they entered. No. It is always necessary to ensure that there is hope and to help to see beyond the window, hoping in rehabilitation. I know that you work hard, looking to this future to rehabilitate each one of those who are in prison.

I encourage you to carry out your important work with sentiments of harmony and unity. All together, Directorate, Penitentiary Police, Chaplains, educational sector, volunteers and external community are called to march in a single direction, to help raise up and nurture in hope those who, unfortunately, have fallen into the trap of evil.

For my part, I accompany you with my affection, which is sincere. I have great closeness to prisoners and those who work in prisons. My affection and my prayer, that you may be able to contribute, with your work, to ensuring that prison, a place of pain and suffering, may also be a laboratory of humanity and hope. In the other diocese [Buenos Aires], I often went to the prison; and now every fortnight, on Sunday, I make a telephone call to a group of prisoners in a prison I visited frequently. I am close. And I have always had a sensation when entering a prison: "Why them and not me?" This thought has done me great good. Why them and not me? I could have been there, and instead no, the Lord gave me a grace that my sins and my shortcomings were forgiven and not seen, I don't know. But that question helps greatly: why them and not me?

I heartily bless all of you and your loved ones, and I ask you, please, to pray for me, as I am in need. Thank you!
