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UDIENZA AI PARTECIPANTI ALL'INCONTRO INTERNAZIONALE DELLA PASTORALE CATTOLICA NELLE CARCERI

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A fine mattinata, nella Sala degli Svizzeri del Palazzo Apostolico di Castel Gandolfo, il Santo Padre Benedetto XVI ha ricevuto in Udienza i partecipanti al XII Congresso Internazionale della Commissione Internazionale per la Pastorale Cattolica nelle Prigioni ed ha loro rivolto il discorso che riportiamo di seguito:

• DISCORSO DEL SANTO PADRE

Dear Friends,

I am pleased to welcome you as you gather in Rome for the Twelfth World Congress of the International Commission of Catholic Prison Pastoral Care. I thank your President, Doctor Christian Kuhn, for the kind words expressed on behalf of the Executive Board of the Commission.

The theme of your Congress this year, "Discovering the Face of Christ in Every Prisoner" (*Mt 25:36*), aptly portrays your ministry as a vivid encounter with the Lord. Indeed, in Christ the "love of God and love of neighbour have become one", so that "in the least of the brethren we find Jesus himself, and in him...God" (*Deus Caritas Est*, 15).

Your ministry requires much patience and perseverance. Not infrequently there are disappointments and frustrations. Strengthening the bonds that unite you with your bishops will enable you to find the support and guidance you need to raise awareness of your vital mission. Indeed, this ministry within the local Christian community will encourage others to join you in performing corporal works of mercy, thus enriching the ecclesial life of the diocese. Likewise, it will help to draw those whom you serve into the heart of the universal Church, especially through their regular participation in the celebration of the sacraments of Penance and the Holy Eucharist (cf. *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 59).

Prisoners easily can be overwhelmed by feelings of isolation, shame and rejection that threaten to shatter their hopes and aspirations for the future. Within this context, chaplains and their collaborators are called to be

heralds of God's infinite compassion and forgiveness. In cooperation with civil authorities, they are entrusted with the weighty task of helping the incarcerated rediscover a sense of purpose so that, with God's grace, they can reform their lives, be reconciled with their families and friends, and, insofar as possible, assume the responsibilities and duties which will enable them to conduct upright and honest lives within society.

Judicial and penal institutions play a fundamental role in protecting citizens and safeguarding the common good (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2266). At the same time, they are to aid in rebuilding "social relationships disrupted by the criminal act committed" (cf. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 403). By their very nature, therefore, these institutions must contribute to the rehabilitation of offenders, facilitating their transition from despair to hope and from unreliability to dependability. When conditions within jails and prisons are not conducive to the process of regaining a sense of a worth and accepting its related duties, these institutions fail to achieve one of their essential ends. Public authorities must be ever vigilant in this task, eschewing any means of punishment or correction that either undermine or debase the human dignity of prisoners. In this regard, I reiterate that the prohibition against torture "cannot be contravened under any circumstances" (*Ibid.*, 404).

I am confident that your Congress will provide an opportunity to share your experiences of the mysterious countenance of Christ shining through the faces of the imprisoned. I encourage you in your efforts to show that face to the world as you promote greater respect for the dignity of the detained. Finally, I pray that your Congress will be an occasion for you yourselves to appreciate anew how, in attending to the needs of the imprisoned, your own eyes are opened to the marvels God does for you each day (cf. *Deus Caritas Est*, 18).

With these sentiments I extend my heartfelt wishes to you and all the participants in the Congress for the success of your meeting and willingly impart my Apostolic Blessing to you and your loved ones.

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