

Prison chaplains fill vital role

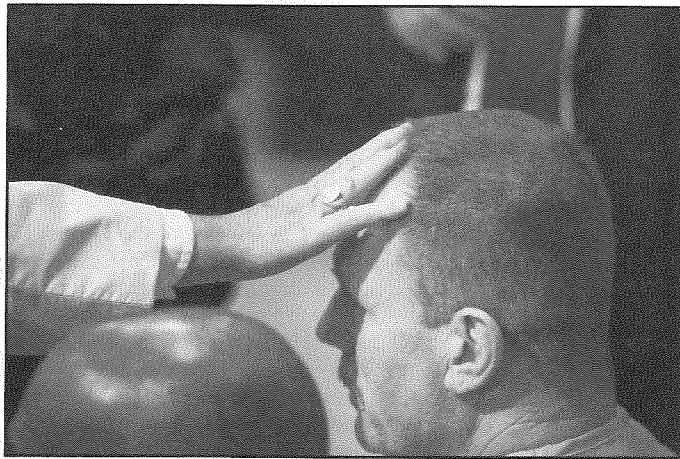
THE role of the prison chaplain goes far beyond just looking after the religious and spiritual needs of prisoners; they also provide much-needed emotional, practical and social support.

That's the view of Dr Ruth Webber, a professor (honorary) at the Australian Catholic University and author of the paper, *I was in Prison, A Window into Prison Ministry*, published last year by the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council.

Dr Webber was delivering the keynote address at the inaugural Catholic Prison Chaplains National Gathering recently, following her visits to prisons in Wisconsin, United States.

Dr Webber also highlighted the role of restorative justice practices that involve the offender, the victim, the family and community. "The offender is brought to understand how his or her actions have caused harm to people and a process of reconciliation begins," she said.

The theme of the gathering was "Prison Ministry – The Face of Mercy", which continued the conversation prompted by the publication in 2011 of the Australian Catholic Bishops' Social Justice Statement, *Building Bridges, Not Walls: Prisons and the justice system*.



A helping hand: Pope Francis blesses inmates at the Curran-Fromhold Correctional Facility in Philadelphia.

Conference organiser Fr Peter Carroll msc posed the question to delegates, "Where do you see the light of mercy shining in your role as prison chaplains?" This invitation was prompted by Pope Francis' announcement that there will be a "Jubilee for Prisoners" during the Year of Mercy to be celebrated on November 6, 2016.

The theme of the gathering also echoed the message of Pope Francis on his recent visit to the Curran-Fromhold Correctional Facility in Philadelphia, United States.

The Pope stressed the importance of rehabilitation in his address to the prison inmates. "This time in your life can only have one purpose: to give you a hand in getting back on the right road, to give you a hand to help you rejoin society.

"All of us are part of that effort, all of us are invited to encourage, help and enable your rehabilitation. A rehabilitation which everyone seeks and desires: inmates and their families, correctional authorities, social and educational programs."

Church offers support to end death penalty

AUSTRALIA'S Catholic Bishops have offered the Church's help in the Australian Government's international work to abolish the death penalty.

The offer came as a submission to an inquiry by the Federal Parliament's Joint Standing Committee for Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade into Australia's advocacy for the abolition of the death penalty.

Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) President, Archbishop Denis Hart, restated the Catholic Church's opposition to the death penalty, saying we must recognise and honour the human dignity of both victims and offenders.

The death penalty has been made real to many Australians by the execution of Australians Andrew Chan and Myuran Sukumaran earlier this year.

The submission said the drug crimes committed by Chan and Sukumaran were abhorrent. "Justice must prevail and appropriate punishment be used for the common good of the community when crimes are committed. But jail sentences, not execution, are the more appropriate means for punishing offenders and deterring those who would consider committing such crimes."

Archbishop Hart said: "Human dignity is the dignity unique to human beings and the basis of all human rights.

"The inherent dignity and right to life of every person must be

respected from the moment of conception until natural death.

"The imposition of the death penalty is cruel and unnecessary for what it does to those found guilty, to their families and to our society. Communities are much richer when they can demonstrate mercy.

"Prison chaplains have a vital role journeying with prisoners to help them turn their lives around.

"Chaplains are within the prison, but not of it. They are a sign of mercy and that society has not given up on the prisoner. They bring hope and can be a window for the wider community into the experience of the jailed person."

Archbishop Hart said the ACBC would be happy to assist the Australian Government to contact appropriate diplomats in the Vatican, and help make representations to other national governments with the assistance of the respective national Catholic bishops conferences.

Restorative justice, for example, is one approach that can help turn around peoples' lives, help them take responsibility for their actions and bring healing to both the victim and the perpetrator.

• A copy of the submission can be found on the ACBC website: <https://www.catholic.org.au/about-us/public-policy-office-contact>

Paris attacks an 'abomination'

THE Australian Catholic Bishops have expressed their deep sympathies for the hundreds of innocent people killed and maimed in the terrorist attacks in Paris.

President of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, Archbishop Denis Hart said, "We offer our prayers and condolences to the victims of these horrendous attacks. Like all Australians, we join in solidarity with the people of France and share in the hope that the perpetrators and their networks will be swiftly brought to justice.

"Our shock and sadness draws us close to the victims and their families. As we mourn for them and their loved ones, we must affirm that feelings of grief and compassion are a sign of a fundamental goodness in humanity that cannot be defeated by evil.

"The disregard of terrorists for the sanctity of human life is an abomination. And, as the Holy Father Pope Francis has stated, 'using the name of God to justify this path is blasphemy'.

"These acts of terrorism can never be allowed to divide communities through fear and hatred. Divisive actions of hate will only serve to help evil organisations like ISIL. Their aim is to divide the world and make Muslims the enemy of the West.

"Hence, we must resist calls to close our borders to refugees from the Middle East. It is love and not hate that will defeat extremism."