

**Report of the President at the XIV Congress of  
The International Commission of Catholic Prison Pastoral Care  
(ICPPC)**

**Panama City 6<sup>th</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup> February 2017**

Dear Friends,

Some time has passed since our last Congress held in Yaounde, Cameroon in September 2011. However, for the ICCPPC that time has been fruitfully spent in such diverse ways across the continents as you and I have contributed greatly in the field of Catholic Prison Pastoral Care.

The Board has been working on your behalf developing areas of pastoral care and responding to various requests where possible. As always the greatest resource we have is ourselves –the men and women who work tirelessly, sometimes with little or no reward, to ensure that those in prison are safe and that their voice is heard. I know many of you are not paid and often struggle to provide for you own families; I know priests and religious who have to balance their parish life and that of the prison while still finding time for themselves. So I thank you sincerely for all you have done and will continue to do on behalf of ICCPPC.

Since Cameroon, the Board has held an annual meeting in Popowo (Poland), Buenos Aires (Argentina), New Delhi (India) and Edinburgh (Scotland). The meetings have coincided with National events to allow the Board to have first hand experience of what is happening in each country and also meet with local chaplains, volunteers and where possible prisoners and prison staff. This experience gives us an understanding of what is needed in each region and also an overview of the tremendous work being carried out by all those involved in prison ministry. Here the Church is clearly alive and active.

In my capacity as President of ICCPPC, I have been attending the annual meeting of the UN Crime Commission in Vienna, usually held in May. This has given the opportunity for ICCPPC to link in with the Holy See's representative to the UN in Vienna and also with many other NGOs such as Amnesty International, Prison Reform International, and UN groups such as ACUNS. This relationship has enabled us to have a voice on various subjects such as: overcrowding, mental health, women in prison, children in prison, healthy eating, good medical facilities, decent living accommodation, reintegration and employment, refugees and radicalisation.

One of our proudest moments, after years of debate was to see the adoption of the Mandela Rules (formerly the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners) I was fortunate to have played a big role in getting a meeting held in South Africa which led to the agreement and adoption of these rules especially in terms of freedom of religion amongst many other changes.

As a result of the ICCPPC's presence at the UN, I was also asked to take part in several meetings of the Council of Europe and the European Union, along with some other colleagues of ICCPPC and the Holy See's Permanent Representative. These meetings were very constructive and encouraging as all the European Ministers of Justice said that 'the Church is the solution to the problem of radicalisation and not the problem' and that we needed 'more chaplains and highly trained chaplains'. Hearing this remark many times over helped me to realise that prison chaplaincy has a huge role to play in modern day society.

Other meetings included meeting with the Congregation for the Clergy and hearing how highly regarded prison chaplaincy is held by Cardinal Stella who himself is engaging with Episcopal Conferences to see what further links can be made between the Holy See and ICCPPC to enable us to work better together; visits were also made by myself and the secretary-general to see Cardinal Turkson at the pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and I made a further visit to the San Egidio Community in Rome.

The final meeting the Secretary-general, Mr. Ryan van Eijk, and I made to Rome was as part of the Jubilee Year of Mercy when we attended that awe inspiring Mass Pope Francis celebrated for over 1,000 prisoners. The entire celebration was so deeply moving and spiritual, one which I am sure made a huge impact on all who were present. On that occasion I met with the Holy Father and presented him with the book of reflections written by many prison chaplains to mark the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of ICCPPC. I also presented the Holy Father with a bronze image of the front cover of said book and a course on the Catholic Faith written by a Scottish prison chaplain, Fr. Eddie McGhee entitled 'Faith Inside'.

In conclusion I would like to say that shortly after the Congress in Cameroon, we heard the tragic news of a fire in a prison in Honduras which killed over 300 prisoners. On hearing this news I immediately contacted the local bishop and asked him to pass on to the chaplains the assurance of our prayerful support. I know this was graciously received by all those working through this tragedy that so many unknown people from around the world were thinking of them in the time of need. Also recently I have been in touch with our colleagues in the Philippines and Brazil offering that same prayerful support and helping to raise awareness their own tragedies.

On a happier note I wish to raise awareness of a project in Singapore called the 'yellow ribbon project' named after a country & western song; 'Tie a yellow ribbon'. This project is met with great enthusiasm and joy as it welcomes those released from prison back into the community as real citizens offering them employment, housing and a real sense of belonging. I encourage you to research this project and see if it can be developed in your own country. Many countries now have events such as 'Prisoners' Week' or 'Prisons' Day' highlighting the needs of those imprisoned, their families and the impact of crime on victims and the wider community.

Finally, I am grateful to the local chaplains and volunteers here in Panama and to the work of CELAM for giving us the opportunity to meet here. I thank to the hotel staff and the volunteers who have assisted us throughout the week; the interpreters who have enabled us to understand each other and above all you –the participants for making this such a successful congress.

Of course we must also remember the many, too many, men and women in prison who journey with us and freely share their life with us, without them we would not be here today. Let us not

forget those who are the victims of crime, as church, we have a duty of care to them also within our broken society. Let us ask Our Lady of Mercies intercession on them and on us all as we return to our homes and our work from here.

Thank you and God bless you all.

Fr. Brian Gowans

President of ICCPPC.