

CATHOLIC CONFERENCE OF OHIO

September 1, 2020

Open Letter to Governor Mike DeWine, ODRC Director Annette M Chamber-Smith, ODRC Religious Services Administrator Mike Davis, Ohio Prison Wardens, and Ohio Prison Chaplains

From the Diocesan Catholic Prison Ministry Directors and Coordinator throughout Ohio

In this unprecedented and challenging time, we offer you our prayers, our hopes, and our recommitment to stand with you, as together, we pursue ways to safely offer spiritual ministry to inmates and their families. We deeply appreciate your public service and the ongoing support you offer to each of us.

We continually pray for all of the staff of correctional facilities, administrative leaders, and corrections officers and their families. We pray for all the chaplains serving the various faith communities. Together we share the common ministry of offering hope and restoration. We especially appreciate the access and openness of your Religious Services Administrator, Mike Davis.

During this pandemic we recognize the importance of health safety and the need for extra precautions. We offer the following thoughts and recommendations on ways we might journey together.

Foundations of Catholic Ministry

Our Catholic teachings foster respect for life and the law, forgiveness and mercy. Our beliefs about the sanctity of human life and dignity are at the center of our approach to prison ministry. We strive to bring the love and consolation of Jesus Christ to those incarcerated. We offer a living message of God's love and forgiveness. Our presence, prayers and communication offer a sense of trust and hope. We advocate for restorative justice that seeks rehabilitation and supportive re-entry into society.

We reemphasize the **essential elements** of Catholic ministry: providing Mass, allowing the reception of Holy Communion, and offering the Sacrament of Reconciliation. We encourage working together on protocols that will ensure uniformity and the safe delivery of these central Catholic practices. Our churches currently have protocols in place to ensure that Holy Communion is distributed in a way that safeguards the health of both sacramental ministers and communicants. We offer to share our protocols and look forward to working with the administration to enhance them as needed to meet your needs.

Our Catholic ministry also includes bible studies, RCIA (The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults), prayer services, spiritual counsel, spiritual retreats, pen pal programs, family outreach and reentry programs. These programs help us to give that sense of God's love and presence within all of us.

Importance of Face-To-Face Ministry

Face-to-face ministry is essential for spiritual growth, rehabilitation, and building relationships. We understand the many challenges facing the resumption of face-to-face ministry. We, too, are seeking ways to ensure the safety of our ministers. Many of our contract chaplains and volunteers are in the high-risk category for COVID-19. We thank you for your safety protocols and welcome continued actions to open up the facilities for face-to-face gatherings as soon as possible.

Religious Materials

Holy cards, prayer cards, and rosaries are important to Catholics. We thank all the chaplains who have helped in distributing these materials and ask you to continue this practice. We also thank and ask you to continue using bulletin boards to attach religious materials and cards.

Accessing Technology

This health crisis has prompted all of us to develop electronic resources and better utilize technology. It also has exposed technological weaknesses. We have discovered that some of the DVDs we sent to our jails and prisons in order to offer Mass and other spiritual guidance were not compatible with existing computer systems. Video streaming capacities vary from facility to facility, as does access to computer tablets.

We are most willing to collaborate on ways to better access and utilize links to spiritual and religious resources on the ODRC and individual prison websites. We would like to collaborate with you on expanding video conferencing (e.g. ZOOM and Skype) to help us meet that face-to-face element that is so important in prison ministry. Ensuring appropriate supervision for the use of technologies is a challenge, but hopefully one that can be resolved.

Inmate and Family Support

In this time of increased isolation due to COVID, finding ways to communicate encouragement and solace to those incarcerated is lifegiving. In our conversations with family members we hear concerns about accessibility and quality of video calls. Family members also have reported an inability to obtain accurate and up to date information on the physical and mental health status of loved ones. We encourage working together in order to increase opportunities for communication with families and options for visitation.

Reentry Programs

Each of our prison ministry programs promotes reentry efforts. Some of these efforts are through direct sponsorship, while others collaborate with community partners. We work closely with our Catholic Charities and the Society of St. Vincent DePaul programs in offering education, employment, housing and support services. We welcome discussions, especially at this time, regarding the ability of our volunteers to become mentors-of-record to communicate with incarcerated persons involved with our prison reentry efforts. We also support any additional public funding and public policy changes that will help expand these needed services.

We pray for God's wisdom and courage, that each of you might continue to exercise your offices and responsibilities with great care and respect.

Archdiocese of Cincinnati: [Marty Arlinghaus](#), Director of Prison Ministry, Office of Incarceration Ministries

Diocese of Cleveland: [Sr. Rita Mary Harwood](#), SND, Secretariat for Parish Life and Development

Diocese of Columbus: [Jerry Freewalt](#), Director, Office for Social Concerns

Diocese of Toledo: [Deacon Ed Ireland](#), Coordinator for the Office of Life and Justice/Jail and Prison Ministry

Diocese of Youngstown: [William Barber](#), Coordinator for Prison Ministry

St. Vincent DePaul Society: [Wendy Tarr](#), Director, Vincentian Ohio Action Network (VOAN)

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