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## Holy Mass resumes in prisons. Don Grimaldi: "Chaplains were a bridge to the outside world during lockdown"

Holy Mass celebration has resumed also in prison. As provided for in a circular letter issued by the Prison Administration Department (DAP), Eucharistic celebrations with the participation of prisoners are permitted as of June 1st. "Masses have started again, albeit gradually due to difficulties in organizing these liturgical moments at a time of emergency," said Father Raffaele Grimaldi, Inspector General of chaplains in Italian prisons. "Some directorates had already given permission for Mass celebration in compliance with safety regulations", but "for the moment only chaplains, deacons and nuns are allowed."



Immagine non disponibile

Certainly, in addition to compliance with all protective and safety measures, the number of inmates who can attend Holy Mass depends on the capacity of the chapels in each prison. In order to facilitate attendance, Masses are being celebrated in open spaces, such as recreation grounds or outdoor areas. Are the volunteers still barred from entering prisons? Only those involved in projects or specific activities are allowed entry. I hope that at the end of the month volunteers will be permitted to return to prison, as I specifically asked the Prison Administration Department. Detainees suffered increased distress during the pandemic period, lacking the support of volunteers and with chaplains themselves experiencing difficulties in entering specific prison facilities.

**The distress we all experienced during the lockdown was more intense in prisons.**

We should consider in particular those prisoners who are poor, migrants, homeless, without a family. I hope that as soon as possible they will be able to resume, with due precautions and in full safety, those activities aimed at making detention an environment conducive to redemption, offering opportunities for growth during this time of probation. I therefore hope that voluntary work may be resumed in prisons as soon as practicable. Together with chaplains and clergy, it offers enormous support to detainees. There are well prepared, motivated volunteers who do a lot of good onto others. What were chaplains allowed to do during the darkest moments of the epidemic in Italy? Throughout the lockdown period the chaplains tried to be as close as they could to prison staff. In fact, their practical efforts depended on prison administration. In some cases, where stricter measures were adopted against the health crisis, the chaplains could do little, in that they could not

meet with the inmates and could not enter prison departments. However, these were measures taken to limit the possibility of contagion, along with other safety measures. And indeed the number of cases was very low. If the contagion had spread in prisons it would have been a disaster. On the other hand, suffice it to mention the uncontrollable outbreaks of violence in our prisons at the very start of the epidemic spread in Italy. *In detention centres with a quieter atmosphere and where the management permitted more activity, the chaplains were also able to meet some inmates for personal conversations to support them on a human, moral and spiritual level.* Then, through prison officers, they were informed on the material necessities of the prisoners, especially the most needy, lacking access to parcels from family members. The chaplains provided clothing items and personal hygiene products.

### The emergency saw a major effort on the part of the chaplains

and I thank them for everything they've done in this difficult period. **Italian prisons are marked by chronic overcrowding, that grew more serious with the coronavirus emergency...**

*Paradoxically, those who were eligible for house arrest in this context, were often unable to do so because they were homeless.* Some organizations have endeavoured to address these situations and offered suitable accommodations, but of course these were just a limited number of cases. Most of them were unable to avail themselves of the benefits provided. **How did the detainees cope with the suspension of meetings with family members during stage 1 of the health crisis?** During the lockdown period, prison departments provided tablets to allow video calls. Inmates were able to see their homes, thus, in some ways, it was also a good thing. In many different situations, the pandemic has introduced a new way of working: *meetings with family members have now resumed, obviously with the necessary precautions. However, if these new communication tools were used more often in prisons, it would be ideal as it would facilitate relations with family members who live far away or who cannot afford to travel and, therefore, might find it difficult to visit their relatives in prison.* **What are the inmates' main requests today?** The poorest are asking for material goods, since they lack everything. In general, psychological and moral support is being requested.

### During this period, the chaplains acted as a bridge with family members

to reassure them of the health conditions of their relatives in prison. **During the lockdown we all felt "imprisoned", albeit in our own homes: has this somewhat helped to foster understanding of life in prison?** Home confinement has allowed many people to relate to the lives of prisoners. *I hope, therefore, that what we have experienced as "suspended time" will not be rapidly forgotten. I hope it deeply touched the hearts of all of us, allowing us to understand the suffering of so many prisoners and be more open to show solidarity.* But I believe that this will be especially true for the most sensitive among us, and not for those who are closed in on their own selfishness and only care about their own interests.

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