

HANDLING PRISONS AMID CORONAVIRUS

Catholic League president Bill Donohue comments on the issue of prisons and coronavirus:

On April 6, Pope Francis weighed in on how to handle crowded prisons during coronavirus. "Where there is overcrowding—many people there—there is a danger, in this pandemic, that it will end in a serious disaster. We pray for those responsible, for those who have to make decisions in this, to find a right and creative way to solve the problem."

The Holy Father's remarks are very much in the Catholic tradition. He identified a problem and called for us to pray for those charged with handling it. He did not get into the weeds instructing public officials how to proceed. He understands how tricky this issue is: We have to balance public health with public safety. This demands prudence, the most cardinal of the cardinal virtues.

On April 3, U.S. Attorney General Bill Barr asked the director of the Bureau of Prisons to expand efforts to release prisoners because of "emergency conditions." He asked Michael Carvajal to "move vulnerable inmates out of these institutions." But he did not say to just open the doors and let them free. He prudentially called for these select prisoners to be moved to home confinement. Barr, who is Catholic, is acting very much in accordance with the pope's expectations.

Now contrast the Catholic approach with that of left-wing politicians and activists.

On March 31, it was reported that New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio had already released 900 inmates from the city's jails, with plans to release hundreds more. They are not going to

home confinement—they are free to go wherever they want. Subsequently, the mayor pushed for radical bail reform: it has allowed hardened criminals to take to the streets, many of whom have committed violent crimes.

On March 18, the ACLU wrote a letter to Attorney General Barr pleading with him to release a large group of prisoners, including those who are pregnant (it would no doubt assist these women to abort their child—another civil liberties right). Several state chapters have since called for inmates to be released. As we might expect, the ACLU's credibility on this issue is shot.

On February 2, two days after President Trump banned travel from China to the U.S., the ACLU said his decision would “do more harm than good.” It now looks foolish. Indeed, if it had gotten its way, many more innocent persons would now be dead.

We know what the ACLU really wants: it wants to abolish prisons. In 1972 the ACLU launched its National Prison Project, an operation established to protect the constitutional rights of prisoners. Philip Hirschkop was one of its most active officials, and three years earlier he set the tone for this effort when he co-wrote a piece in the *Virginia Law Review* titled, “The Unconstitutionality of Prison Life.” Yes, he wanted to abolish all prisons. That ACLU mentality hasn't changed.

Not to be outdone, we have “Squad” congressional members Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Rashida Tlaib, and Ayanna Pressley writing a letter on March 9 to the director of the Bureau of Prisons outlining their concerns for prisoners. Pressley actually called for the “compassionate release” of federal inmates. She did not say whether releasing serial murderers and rapists without a trace of compassion would suffice.

Thank God we have a pope who exercises more prudence and common sense than these left-wing activists and politicians.