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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2014/10/26/pope-francis-denounces-solitary-confinement-calls-for-prison-conditions-that-respect-human-dignity/>

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by [Jean Casella](#) | October 26, 2014

In a wide-ranging speech on Thursday, Pope Francis revealed himself as a passionate criminal justice reformer. His words also suggest that he is familiar with the controversies surrounding solitary confinement and supermax prisons, and strongly opposes their use.

Speaking at the Vatican to representatives of the International Association of Penal Law, [the Pope said](#): All Christians and people of good will are called today to fight not only for the abolition of the death penalty, be it legal or illegal, in all of its forms, but also for the improvement of prison conditions in respect for the human dignity of those who have been deprived of liberty.

Previous popes, including John Paul II, have been outspoken opponents of capital punishment. But Francis took his discourse a step further, denouncing sentences of life in prison, and saying that a life sentence is a hidden death sentence.

The Pope called for a ban on all criminal detention of children, for special treatment for elderly people in prison, and for an end to preventive detention, which he called a hidden, illegal punishment. More broadly, he denounced the deplorable conditions of detention that take place in different parts of the world, which he called an arbitrary and merciless exercise of power over persons who have been deprived of freedom.

Francis specifically turned his attention to supermax prisons. His term was *carceri di massima sicurezza*, which more literally translates to maximum-security prisons but from his emphasis on extreme isolation and its consequences, it is clear that the Pope was referring to the use of solitary confinement. Pope Francis's statement in full on the subject is as follows (with apologies for a rough translation):

One form of torture is sometimes applied by imprisonment in maximum security prisons. With the motive of providing greater security to the community or special treatment for certain categories of prisoners, its main feature is none other than isolation. As demonstrated by studies carried out by different human rights bodies, the lack of sensory stimuli, the complete lack of communication and the lack of contact with other human beings, causes physical and emotional suffering such as paranoia, anxiety, depression, and weight loss, and significantly increases the chances of suicide.

This phenomenon is characteristic of high security prisons, but it also occurs in other kinds of prisons, along with other forms of physical and mental torture. These tortures are now administered not only as a means to achieve a particular purpose, such as confession or denunciation, in the name of national security. They are a genuine surplus of pain that is added to the suffering of imprisonment. In this way, torture takes place not only in clandestine detention centers or in modern concentration camps, but also in prisons, juvenile institutions, psychiatric hospitals, police stations, and other institutions of detention and punishment.

The Pope also warned against seeing prison as a cure for all of society's ills. In recent decades there has been a growing conviction that through public punishment it is possible to solve different and disparate social problems, as if for different diseases one could prescribe the same medicine, he said. In conclusion, he advised that caution in the application of punishment should be the governing principle of all criminal justice systems, and that States should not, for any purpose, subvert respect for the dignity of the human person.

Pope Francis previously [made headlines](#) during his first Holy Week by washing the feet of twelve youth held at a juvenile detention center in Rome while celebrating the mass of the Last Supper, when Jesus washed the feet of his disciples.

In a papal mass just a few days before his speech on criminal justice, Francis [told](#) an assembly of Catholic bishops: God is not afraid of new things. That is why he is continuously surprising us, opening our hearts and guiding us in unexpected ways.

Jean Casella is the director of Solitary Watch. She has also published work in The Guardian, The Nation, and Mother Jones, and is co-editor of the book *Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement*. She has received a Soros Justice Media Fellowship and an Alicia Patterson Fellowship. She tweets [@solitarywatch](#).

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I am so pleased to finally have a Pope worth his salt. It is my greatest hope that our civilized society will all see how evil our justice system is and that when we do nothing for the incarcerated, we are participating in the degradation of others.

Amen! You are either part of the solution or you are part of the problem!

Sorry I did not capitalize the P in Pope above, I meant no disrespect, I am a poor typist!

They also will answer, Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you? He will reply, I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me. Matthew 25:27-30

This is the darkest shadow part of our society. When human dignity is honored in all individuals, we can consider our society dignified.

I wish that politicians, Judges, attorneys and especially those who are employees of the prosecution, all over our country would read this. I am against the death penalty. I am against the current system of reform. God is our Judge. I am against confinement. Something needs to be done about this system in our country. It is not rehabilitative. It is against our U.S. Constitution eighth Amendment, the right against cruel or unusual punishment. Is solitary confinement a usual punishment? Is it humane? Is it cruel? Many of those that are confined have mental illness, are indigent, have P.T.S.D. or autism or are just under educated and uninformed and know no other way of life! Some, who are incarcerated are innocent, they just were in the wrong place at the wrong time or were not aware of their rights. Rights are violated everyday! Give these men and women and children a sense of value, a goal. Teach them about God! Prison and its supposed reform is nothing more than BIG business now. There is very little education. There is abuse. These people are under-fed and in some cases starved. They are mistreated and sometimes beaten. Some of them, when put in confinement, freak out. (I would) Then they are punished for freaking out. Some inmates do not understand. We need more mental health facilities. We need more humanity, and we need more compassion. As my Christian Aunt used to say, this world is going to hell in a hand basket. Wake up people before it is too late and your freedom and rights have been taken away. God bless you pope Francis, and thank you for your uplifting speech.

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