



CALL TO ACTION
METRO NY CHAPTER
Inspire Catholics, Transform Church



The Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Cry Out to the Church Seeking Justice, Equality and a Community for All

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Call to Action Metro NY (Who We Are)

Call to Action (CTA) is a national Catholic organization committed to the reforms proposed by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). The Council document *Lumen Gentium* in rejecting clericalism, legalism and triumphalism opened up new possibilities for ecclesial structures that would involve the wisdom and actions of the whole community.

Unfortunately, apart from some commendable progress in the liturgical and ecumenical areas, the Vatican remains committed to old paradigms, in particular to maintaining male hierarchical control. Women are shut out of nearly all positions of power in the church to the clear detriment of the whole organization.

CTA Metro New York, in full alignment with our national organization, continues to advocate strongly for radical change in this area so that the wisdom and spiritual insights of women will be heeded and reflected in all church policy deliberations. The sacrament of Holy Orders should be fully open to both sexes, including married people, especially at a time when there is a severe shortage of Catholic ministers.

Call to Action looks to church and government for policies that combat the evils of racism. We are always on the side of the disadvantaged in housing and education and we stand with the LGBTQ community in their demands for fair treatment by church and state. Our members are especially engaged in remedying the gross unfairness of the American prison system where the poor always get inferior treatment and face major systemic obstacles in employment and housing when released.

Our synodal submission reflects our deep concern in this area of incarceration.

June 2022 Listening Sessions (Our Data Collection Methodology)

Recognizing the church's desire to hear from marginalized populations, we utilized our connections from our work on criminal justice issues and reached out to priests and nuns who have worked/are working with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated men and women in the New York Metropolitan area, and asked for their help with outreach. We also contacted dioceses with prison ministries and asked them to share their synod outreach materials. The Kolbe House Jail Ministry in Chicago, Pastoral & Outreach Ministry in the Archdiocese of Seattle, and Catholic Prison Ministries were particularly helpful. We were able to customize prompt questions for listening sessions and questionnaires that focused on the specific needs of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals.

We met on June 29, 2022 with a program in New York City serving men (about 6 and several staff members) returning from incarceration or at risk of incarceration and asked what the Church means to them and what could be done to make the experience of Church more meaningful. These men age range was 25 to 40 years old and they were all people of color and most Baptized Catholics.

It also met in June with a several members of a program for formerly incarcerated women. In addition, the Chapter sent 120 questionnaires with the questions noted below to currently incarcerated men. Many of these questionnaires were interdicted by prison authorities and prison policies preventing research in prisons without the Warden's approval. Nonetheless many received the questionnaire and about a dozen responded. The following are the demographics they reported. Four are persons of color and three are white and 4 are female. Their age range was 36-61 years old and one person was over 62. They all are baptized Catholic.

Repetitions were removed but much of the material are direct quotes or close to direct quotes based on the note taker. Asterisk or new paragraphs indicate a change in the speaker. Where necessary *italics are used to give our best understanding of the intent of the speaker.*

What We Learned

Themes running through the comments include a hunger for accepting communities in local churches and equal treatment regardless of race or experience in the criminal justice system. People are looking for healing homilies after prison that deal with real world problems from their day-to-day life. They want to see Chaplains with more power to support the incarcerated as they transition from incarceration to the community. They hope for more advocacy by the church on their behalf in criminal justice reform especially related to solitary confinement and getting the elderly out of jail. While a minority seek to maintain the traditions of the church the majority seek more involvement of the laity in the operation of the church. They call for equality for women and women priests to offset the shortage of priests and also removing the church from monitoring and controlling people's sexual lives.

1. When you hear “the Church” what does that mean to you? We would like to know about your experiences with the Church.

A place of worship to praise God. *A place I went with my grandmother on holidays and a place where I can go and reflect on myself and my life.

Group coming together to celebrate the love that God has for us all. It means the total community.

*The church means you and me, US, and the entire community of Catholic faith believers throughout the world as one body. *In its purest meaning is LOVE, as lived by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. *The people of God. A place where people come together.

2. Please share with us what your experience with the church has been? (the joys and the sorrows?) What could the church do to make your experience with the church a much more meaningful experience?

Bring in different speakers to listen to their experiences. *This refers to church community activities.* *I have always taken the Church as it is, I've never expected anything more or less, I feel a sense of sanctuary there. *A group breakfast or brunch after Mass would be more meaningful.

From the moment I was wrongly accused of murder the Catholic parish where I worshipped for many years abandoned me. A friend seeing how devastated I was invited me to join a protestant community which went very well for over a year. I chose not to disclose my charges because of fear of rejection again. The police notified the Pastor of my pending charges and the pastor, and his committee called me in for an inquisition and told me I was no longer welcomed in their church. Once convicted and incarcerated I met a nun and the Catholic volunteers, and this resulted in the restoration of my faith and viewed the catholic church in a very different light.

*Church should focus on the body and its health helping people with what we eat and our health and how food impacts our thinking. People are committing suicide and where is the Church on this and God's Word? How is God here for this? We need to care for the earth and the human body. God has a plan BUT we need actual advice, insight, and support.

Growing up I experienced different Churches; Catholic, Zionist and Baptist. The Catholic Church was traditional and indifferent. As kids we had no attention span. I wondered where I belong in those spaces. It should be a place of community. Nobody is perfect and we should love each other as imperfect. My finance and I didn't like the Super Church and we settled for the Catholic Church, don't make it boring.

The Church sometimes speaks too abstract. We need **practical solutions** and this requires people in the Church to lead by example. Some priest practice by example and teach us by what they do, how involved they get in their communities.

Money in the Church should be more regulated and controlled; it can create selfishness and destroy community. There needs to be accountability for money.

Church should be a place where you can go and express yourself, get blessings and confess your sins. New People in Church are not welcomed, they are treated with suspicion.

In Church I was scared since only 2 of us were of color. I was sad that he needed to ask if he could return the next day. *The speaker was explaining that the other person of color felt the need to ask if he could return.* The Church must work to make everyone welcome. How do we welcome everyone? The homilies are too abstract and need to be more concrete. Few homilies are tolerable. Use psychology and healthcare in preaching. There needs to be interest and concerns about the quality of life of the people. Too much time is spent on anti-abortion and too little about helping people and their quality of life.

The Church could spend money on community-based needs for events and encourage the development of community. This requires more integration by integrating cultures, perhaps cultural events to share cultures. Now I wouldn't put my kid in a Church.

Two of the young men, reflecting on the dire poverty their families experienced, declared that, consequently, their attitude to the homeless and other often-despised groups would be to give their meager belongings to help them. That is the moving and edifying message that life has taught them.

A big need for good music and good preaching especially during Covid. Loss of the younger generation, family members fallen away, poor quality of priest, guest priest that missed the point. *The Church needs to be more open to people that accept Christ but don't necessarily agree with all the doctrine or interpretations. *I am appreciative of what the church has done for me during my incarceration and I hope that I can continue to give back as much as I have received.

3. What changes or improvements would you recommend for Catholic Chaplin services inside the prisons?

Unify the Baptists, Protestants and have more outside groups come into share the Word which we don't get in the facility. Make a time period just for confession. *I get a sense of serenity, I don't see the need for changes. It would be nice to have full Mass in English as English speaker as now half is in English and half is in Spanish for the Spanish speakers.

Chaplains should be given more credibility with the Parole board as they can speak authentically as to the character, temperament, reliability, and integrity of an individual particularly regarding public safety and as a peaceful law-abiding citizen. *I would like to see Catholic Chaplin services inside PRISON given more autonomy and all our chaplains given more respect by the prison officials. With sincere respect, in my humble opinion concerns the wardens. Possibly more can be done in the prison to have more appropriate dinner (supper).

Freedom speech, freedom of different services, worship in the unit where you live (praying in your unit). Get the Chaplin involved with the unit, that is, with housing from the unit to the shelter. *We need more advocating in the state system and programs for people who are going home. Protestant groups offer programs like Thrive for Life and have a scholarship housing program. The church has the resources and if they are truly about redemption and mercy there is an urgent need for people falling through the cracks.

4. What changes or improvements would you recommend for your local Church after prison when you attend a Catholic Church in your community?

Be supportive and accept my shortcomings and not judge me for my past. *I'd have to get there first. *I am not sure until I get there. I would like to see more youth involvement.

Establishing outreach to young people in urban areas offering recreational programs. Religious activities can make the connections that prayer and spirituality can have in solving social questions, mental health wellness and setting sights on future goal setting.

Also encourage communication with brothers and sisters in prison as a path to important unification, fostering stronger communities for future growth for an economic, social and political self.

Post incarceration, I would like for the catholic church to be less judgmental, more inclusive, and significantly more involved in their local communities as this is critical to building a larger and stronger family of catholic Christian believers. Continue to help prisoners who get out of prison. *Don't be a judging Church. Visit those in prison. Welcome everybody, push supportive legislation.

5. How can the Catholic Church help with reform of the criminal justice and correctional system in New York State especially related to racism?

If our leaders would interact more with all races to bring us together as humans first, then race would be so simple to overcome.

Help get the "geriatric out" in NY; they should be released especially if their institutional record has been pristine. *The correctional system should be a place where people understand the mistakes they have made and a place where education is highlighted to prepare people for when they are released. I don't believe in racism, but I believe people should be judged on their character and actions.

I haven't seen any racism in correctional system except for blacks being racist against whites. The Catholic Church could be a more vocal public proponent of reform of the criminal justice and correctional system that literally incarcerates Black and Hispanic people to death in astounding numbers. There could be continuous moral outrage publicly expressed about the devastating economic, social and political impact parole board commissioners have on communities of color with there unbroken pattern of violations of law and due process by their capricious and arbitrary denials, resentencing elderly prisoners over and over again, despite irrefutable evidence from statistical studies that show they pose no threat to public safety and the insurmountable obstacles they overcome to secure stable housing and employment while constrained in the most volatile of environments. The Catholic Church could have more of a presence in backing groups for reform like vocal-ng, Justice Committee.org and RAPP.

Religious services (Catholic Mass) and religious programs, are the only programs offered (at least in PRISON) which can truly rehabilitate a prisoner by a complete transformation of the psyche. And ironically, because prison officials know this, religious services are quite frequently disrespected and canceled without justification. This is a lot of work and society is part of the system.

Follow supportive legislation, such as RAPP (getting the elderly out of prison. Ban the boxes (solitary confinement). The death penalty doesn't work, it has killed innocent people. See how we can help (health services and housing). *The church needs to find a seat at the table, are we truly trying to rehabilitate people, if yes, we need a program that promotes that. People need skills and knowledge to be sure that they are productive citizens not just ex-offenders.

6. Reforms related to women in the Church?

Women are excluded from being Deacons, Priests or Bishops and thereby also excluded from essential leadership of the Church. What changes would you like to see regarding women and the Church?

There should be women deacons and priests, it would be good to have a change. We have to get with the times, it is almost 2023. *I feel leadership positions should remain the way they are, women have a huge role in church, and they are needed. I am for the traditional way.

I believe that the Holy Spirit can come through women as much as men. I would not have a problem with women Deacons, Priests, or Bishops. I believe that women are uniquely suited to serve as Deacons, Priests or Bishops because of their natural maternal instincts of mothering, nurturing, etc. that equips them with capabilities of delivering religious, spiritual and secular counseling in a manner that is receptive to the listener while practically focused on building community. It seems to me that establishing trust on some of the harder questions in life, i.e. sex, relationships, marriage, worship, civic responsibility, public safety, restorative justice, economic equity, etc. are among the qualities of pastoral care women in leadership of the church can deliver with less resistance and measurable effectiveness in producing positive outcomes.

I do not think that the Catholic Church should exclude women from positions of leadership, everyone should have equal opportunity for advancement to leadership roles. The faith of every human being and the word of God should not be denied to women. *Priest are spread too thin, Deacons are too limited in what they can do. Priest who left to get married can be used. Woman should be priests. People don't stay in the church, they leave.

Remove the barriers, enact equality, makes opportunities available to all, no more exclusion. *I am saddened that more women do not join the convents as they did in the early 20th century and before. *Who were the ones who hosted congregational worship under the cloak of darkness out of fear of persecution? It was women. Somewhere along the way, men decided that women no longer had the right to hold such a position of esteem and leadership. That is a mistake.

7. The distribution of power and authority in the church.

How is power and authority practiced in the church? Do the people in the pews have an authority/involvement in decision making? How can it be improved?

Everyone has a duty no matter how big or small to lead by example which is serving the Lord. Give people the opportunity to make suggestions. *I do not believe that people in the pews have enough authority/involvement in decision making in the church. It could be improved by questionnaires passed among parishioners. *I do believe that people in the pews have an authority/involvement in decision making if they take an active interest in the affairs and growth of the Church. *I think if someone is very involved with the church and making things happen, they would have room for making decisions.

People should elect bishops. In the south women are leading parishes. Women are compassionate and can relate better to people. Sexual abuse scandal = protect the church not the people and women would not allow priests to move from parish to parish.

The church is a patriarchy with centralized power in Rome and sometimes that is far too sovereign and removed from practicality of a changing world. *The people in the pews are the source of power and authority.

8. Reforms related to human sexuality rules in the Church.

For Current Church rules sex activity is generally only acceptable inside marriage with the intent to procreate.

The following are some of the prohibited activities: same sex behavior, sex outside of marriage, use of birth control, divorce, and remarriage. What changes, if any, do you wish for in these areas?

We can't change God's words, He gives us choices. We should all repent for our sins and become new in Christ.

If couples are married why take birth control. There are new norms that never would have been accepted in the past. Many people go to church out of respect to family and family tradition. People

should be able to be who they are without being judged. The question being asked is too personal for the church to get involved in. Abortion should be accepted in certain circumstances. I strongly believe that the Church's rules regarding sex are extremely outdated. Birth control and sex before marriage is fine by me, as well as divorce and remarriage. It seems to me that modern perspectives are such that a consensus of the faithful should be taken and their feelings regarding church rules on sexual activity polled for discussion and options in a series of meeting with the clerical hierarchy.

I think the rules pertaining to birth control and sex outside of marriage including divorce and remarriage is unrealistic for practicing Catholics and I would like to see some modification in the future. I do not approve of same sex behavior, but I respect the person. Rules are the fundamental part of the Church. *As the Pope said, "Who am I to judge?" *We are all God's creatures and if you are truly of God, you believe in the omniscience of God. In other words, God does not make mistakes.

9. If the Church were to make one big change what would that change be?

Building all the Church together as one, no Division. *The church doesn't need to change...we follow the laws of God all these years. *The church should be more forthcoming regarding child sex abuse.

To take a public and active moral stand on the genocide of police abuse, shooting and mass incarceration of people of color that has become an accepted deviant culture in our society. The interlocking connection of both the discriminatory execution of the laws throughout our country's entire history and the legislation of laws all manner of civic, housing and employment as a codicil to the aftermath of incarceration would be a narrative by the church to saturate the public discourse with awareness of the ruinous outcomes this produced in our communities, perpetuating an unending cycle of poverty, political disenfranchisement and scapegoating by detractors to justify continued victimization of people of color. This would be a seismic change in the level of which the Catholic church.

I would like to see the church work on creating a stronger community of believers who interact and support each other more outside of the weekly mass. *Encourage all people to use their gifts and a hierarchy that is open and honest. Need a new way to find what hope is in the community. *Stop being anti-everything and start being for stuff. *The church builds new churches where real-estate does well and leaves the urban communities and school bereft.

The church must embrace the universal nature of Catholicism and its door to all. We are all God's creatures, and the church needs to show a true sense of community with everyone.

10. If you could create your ideal church – your dream church, what would it look like?

It would look beautiful like the Blue Sky with "Milk and Honey" ... no death just happiness. The ideal church will accept all colors, race, and creeds. I hope for peace among humans, end of hunger, stop making mistakes we should have already learned from.

My dream church would consist of an open-door policy to all nationalities and religions to come worship together with us in the fellowship of God's love. There would be an emphasis of public advocacy on behalf of our parishioners in all government, judicial, police civic and economic practices.

If I could create the ideal church, it would have a flat structure. Our leaders would be within reach to everyone. *A community of people all working together, a vibrant community. Parish councils that are active, engaged and involved in finances. My ideal church would not look to find ways to keep you out, but rather to embrace you as we are.

11. Ideas, suggestions, emphasis, items not covered above:

I'd like the church to embark on a meticulous and wide ranging truth and reconciliation movement on behalf of African Americans with regards to the courts, police injustice, government under provision of resources in communities of color, racial discrimination, mass incarceration of black people and the genocide this has resulted in to the social, economic and political wellbeing of communities of color throughout America compounded by interlocking legislation nationwide disqualifying returning prisoners from virtually every facet of civic entitlement housing employment, etc. *I would like to see the church create its own innocence project to help exonerate innocent Catholics if asked to by our church leaders.

Call to Action Metro New York

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