

Peru Prison Ministry in Covid-19 times

Jun 08 Posted by [Ben sm](#) in [Prison Ministry](#)



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Sr Calota smsm writes from Peru: **The Covid-19 pandemic, has unveiled realities** that were previously unknown to much of humanity, among them the prison world. In order to situate us and enter a little the world of the incarcerated in Peru it is important to mention three critical points:

1. **Overcrowding** (140% of overcrowding is the national average): the penal population is 96, 145 prisoners as of January 2020, located in 68 prisons, with a capacity to house only 40,137, that means that 56,008 inmates have no bed or place to sleep. They try to find accommodation where they can: passageways and staircases.

2. **Health Conditions** of the Prison Population, according to the last penitentiary census (INEI 2016). 55% suffer with some form of illness: 18% of the population suffer with chronic illnesses (lung disease, bronchitis, hypertension and diabetes); 6% from infectious diseases-tuberculosis, STDs and HIV/AIDS; and another 31% other infirmities such as depression, anxiety, addiction to psychotropic substances, hepatitis, cancer and others. The most lamentable is that only 32% of them receive medical treatment.

Within this difficult and precarious reality, now we have to face the COVID-19 pandemic that is affecting the whole world and most harshly the prisoners. Measures have been taken to prevent the spread: social distancing, hand washing and the use of masks, which is impossible for prisoners because of the barbaric conditions of confinement. To have some idea, in a pavilion of the Castro Castro Prison, that has the capacity to shelter 120 persons, there now lives 600 inmates, sharing 8 toilets. Frequent hand-washing when many times there is no water, and to talk about masks in a time of pandemic when everyone needs to use them, and the prices are exorbitant: how do you buy them when there is not even money for food?



Castro Castro Prison Riot - fears in Covid-19 times

3. **The Riots.** As if it was not enough, the authorities (National Penitentiary Institute) and the same Ministry of Justice gave no importance to the above-said problematic situations. They only stopped visits to all prisons, in order to assure the obligatory confinement (social distancing) and with that reduce the spread of the virus from the outside into the interior of the prisons. There are major consequences, because by not permitting the entrance of visitors, it marked the end of entrance of necessities brought in by family members when they visit inmates: food, medicine, products for personal hygiene and washing etc. What the State grants is insufficient. This situation led the inmates to react with riots, demanding medical assistance and the rapid-test for COVID-19. In the case of Castro Castro prison, many inmates were found to have symptoms: fever, cough, sore throat and general malaise, some died with these symptoms. The indifference of the authorities caused the inmates to protest, asking for medical attention and medications: it began peacefully, and this was the intention but finally, it turned violent; ending with nine (9) dead and more than 200 hurt inmates and prison guards.



We had to accompany a very painful experience, with weeping, anxiety, helplessness and a lot of faith in the God of life, that even in the midst of tragedy, we felt Him close. Thank God!

The communication always flowed as the prisoners, had access to a phone calls via public telephones located in their pavilions. This permitted us to be aware of their situation and at once urged us to try and find help so that we could get medications to them from the first week that the virus entered the prison. More than half of the population was infected (5,554 inmates). The first two weeks were very difficult and tragic. Thanks to the Episcopal Commission of Social Action (CEAS)¹ with Mons. Jorge Izaguirre at the helm, the Prison Pastoral team and many other persons who specialized in the theme, they succeeded in getting close to the Ministry of Justice to ask for better medical attention in the prisons.

In Castro Castro the situation is improving with the arrival to two doctors from the Ministry of Health and the medications that the Chaplaincy (the prison's pastoral team) and family members bring. In addition,

the creativity of prisoners who are treating themselves with different medicinal plants. Notwithstanding, more than 30 prisoners have died because of COVID-19, the majority were elderly.



From within the drama lived by the inmates of Castro Castro, has come to light values such as solidarity, fraternity, hope...because they were not concerned for themselves only but rather for those who were most ill. They shared different herbal remedies, oxygen and in some cases, they prepared a communal pot so that inmates who had no family would also be fed. Here I think it is important to note the role played by the "Prison Missionaries" and the basic Christian communities (which we work with daily), who together with the leaders of the pavilions, by taking the measures that were available to them, is allowing them to overcome the pandemic.

I share this testimony to help us see "how pain is unable to quench hope in the deepest part of our heart and that life continues to blossom with strength in adverse circumstances." (Pope Francis).



"Sister, God never abandons us, and, in these moments, we experience it, we live it and feel His merciful hand through you sisters of the Chaplaincy and all those persons who helped us receive your solidarity with medication before and after the riot. In spite of the damage caused to the Chaplaincy (the library, pharmacy, and workshop which were burnt on the day of the riot.)

When I let you know what happened, you said to me, 'Let us leave material things for a moment, now let us focus on life, let us save lives,' These words we carry them in the depths of our hearts...when I shared this with my friends the missionaries of the Chaplaincy, tears filled the eyes of many of them because we felt that God had said these words to us." Never let us tire of saying that God is merciful, he never abandons us, with these medicines we have saved many..." (Ignacio Madrigal)

"Mercy embraces everyone in all corners of the earth. There is no place where His mercy cannot get to, there is no place, nor person that it cannot reach. (Pope Francis). I end my sharing of this experience with these words that are so appropriate in these times.

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