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Pope Francis meets faithful during his weekly general audience at the Vatican, Wednesday, Jan. 19, 2022. (AP Photo/Andrew Medichini)

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**VATICAN CITY** — Pope Francis issued a plea on behalf of prison inmates Wednesday, saying they should never be deprived of hope and always be given the opportunity to redeem themselves.

In remarks at his weekly public audience at the Vatican, Francis told the faithful that "we risk being imprisoned in a justice that doesn't allow one to easily get back up again and confuses redemption with punishment."

"For this, I want to recall today in a particular way our brothers and our sisters who are in prison," the pontiff said. "It's right that those who have made a mistake pay for their mistake, but it's even more right that those who have done wrong should be able to redeem oneself from their mistake. There can't be sentences without windows of hope."

Francis didn't cite the prison policies or justice systems of any particular countries as problematic.

Catholic teaching holds that the death penalty has no justification in modern society. During his papacy, Francis has made attention to the needs of communities on society's margins, including prison populations, a priority.

"Let's think of our incarcerated brothers and sisters, and let's think about the tenderness of God for them and pray for them so that they may find in that window of hope a way out toward a better life," Francis said in concluding his remarks Wednesday.

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Italy's justice minister, while briefing lawmakers in Parliament on criminal justice reform Wednesday, decried overcrowding in the country's prisons, describing it as the most serious of all the problems plaguing the penal system.

Justice Minister Marta Cartabia said Italy's prisons were 14% overcrowded.

"It's a condition that aggravates the relationships among inmates and which makes the work of prison personnel, often victims of aggression, even more difficult," she said. "Overcrowding means greater difficulty in guaranteeing security and greater

difficulty in proposing activities that facilitate paths to rehabilitation."

Cartabia said reforms were under way to allow for sentences that provide alternatives to prison. But she noted that 69,000 persons are already serving their sentences outside prison walls, compared to some 54,000 inmates in Italy's criminal justice system.

Cartabia and Italian Premier Mario Draghi promised reforms last year after they visited a prison in southern Italy where dozens of officers were under investigation for allegedly beating, kicking and punching prisoners during unrest provoked by the coronavirus pandemic.

An Italian newspaper published surveillance video of the officers assaulting inmates, including a prisoner in a wheelchair who was hit on the back with a baton.