Vatican
Vatican News
Pope Leo XIV embraces an inmate as he visits the Federal Penitentiary Complex in the Villa D

Pope Leo XIV embraces an inmate as he visits the Federal Penitentiary Complex in the Villa Devoto neighborhood of Buenos Aires, Argentina, Nov. 11, 2026, during his Nov. 6-17 apostolic journey to Uruguay, Argentina and Peru. (OSV News/Reuters/Yara Nardi)



by Justin McLellan

Vatican Correspondent

View Author Profile

jmclellan@ncronline.org
Follow on Twitter at @m/McLellan_Js

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Vatican City — November 25, 2026
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

As part of a "genuine process of spiritual and theological maturation," Pope Leo XIV reformed the Catholic Church's central structure for ministering to incarcerated people, calling for a "new theological reflection" within the church on prison ministry.

In a decree published Wednesday (Nov. 25), the pope said the church needs to develop a structure for prison ministry that is "not limited to organizational aspects" but "capable of inspiring local pastoral ministries through a shared spirituality experienced as a living encounter with Christ."

For Leo, a canon lawyer, it appears that meant a serious overhaul of the church's central body for coordinating and advancing its prison ministry.

With his *motu proprio* decree, the pope shut down the International Commission of Catholic Prison Pastoral Care, an organization founded in 1950 and which was categorized as a public association of the faithful — meaning it was a self-governing organization backed by the church and subject to its oversight.

In its place, Leo created a "Prison Ministry Outreach Service" intended as a voluntary network of local churches, organizations and bishops' conferences which falls under the Vatican's social justice office, the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development.

As its first coordinator, Leo named Archbishop Jorge García Cuerva of Buenos Aires, whom he met with during his trip through Latin America earlier this month.

During that trip, Leo visited a federal prison complex in Argentina, the second time he has visited a prison as pope, and said prison chaplains help make correctional facilities "more humane and respectful" while assisting in reintegration of prisoners into society.

According to the decree, the new network is tasked with promoting prison ministry throughout the church, providing training for pastoral workers, and working with civil institutions to help create "a more humane approach to correctional policies."

The network's coordinator was also specifically tasked with working with network members to promote academic collaboration between the fields of law and theology.

In the decree the pope wrote that "prison ministry is not separate from the Church's overall work of evangelization."

"In a world marked by injustice, the root of social ills, the problem of prisons is a problem of society itself," he wrote. "Consequently, prison ministry also concerns the entire People of God. Jesus' disciples are called to bear witness everywhere that no one is excluded from God's love."

The National Catholic Reporter's Rome Bureau is made possible in part by the generosity of Joan and Bob McGrath.

Advertisement