

Cardinal calls for prisoners to be treated with 'kindness and respect'

Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, England and Wales's most senior Roman Catholic cleric, has called for prisoners to be treated with more kindness and respect.

According to the Cardinal, the solution is for the prison system to be more sympathetic towards prisoners.

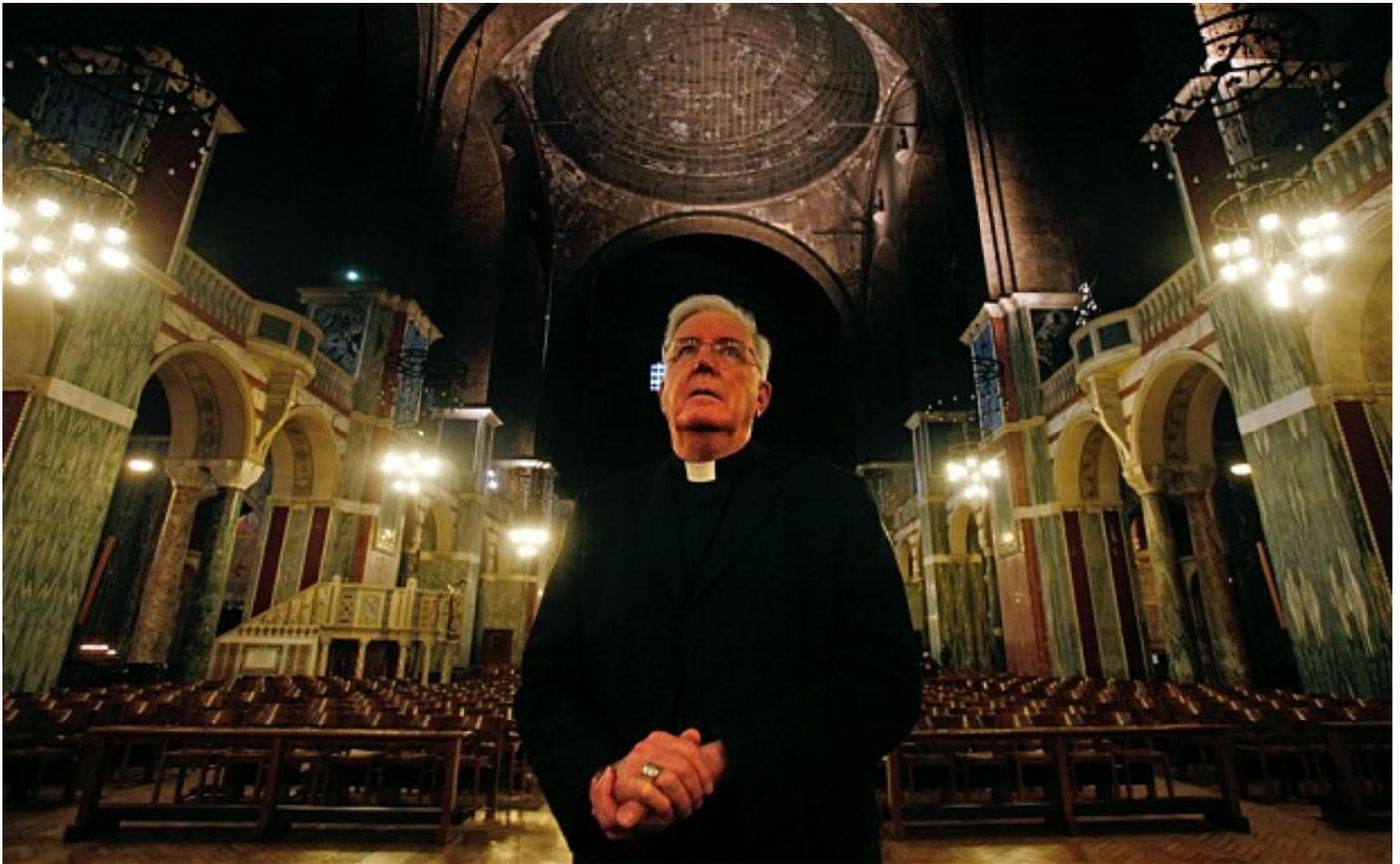


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The Cardinal questioned the "primarily punitive" nature of the British justice system, which he blamed for a rise in the prison population.

He said that the doubling of the number of prisoners in the past decade is down to a more punitive justice system, rather than any significant increase in crime rates.

The prison system must be more "sympathetic" towards prisoners. He said: "Sometimes, good things happen in prison. Sometimes prisoners take the few opportunities that exist, to address the issues behind their offending behaviour and are able to move forward positively in their lives.

"This experience of being treated with respect and kindness is not mere sympathy. It is not a soft way of treating people who have committed crime.

"In fact, it is a care which has strict boundaries and which challenges the core member to change and to help themselves."

He said that the prison system must take into account the importance of rehabilitation rather than imposing punitive measures and said that prisoners are often misunderstood:

"Shouldn't we try to better understand why people commit crime? I suspect that better understanding would lead to less punishment and a clearer connection between criminal justice and social policy."

He said: "We all need to examine our consciences", adding "We live in a society where most people do not want to know about prison."

The Cardinal's comments come days after Justice Secretary Chris Grayling said there would be a radical re-think of the UK's approach to the European Court of Human Rights after it ruled against the UK ban on prisoner voting.

The Cardinal was giving the annual Sir Harold Hood Memorial Lecture in support of prison charity Pact. He retired as Archbishop of Westminster, and leader of the Catholic Church in England and Wales, three years ago.

On reaching 80 in August, he had to give up his place in the College of Cardinals and will no longer vote in any future Papal Conclave.

He remains the senior Cardinal in the British Isles as his successor as Archbishop of Westminster, Vincent Nichols, has yet to be given the title Cardinal.

Murphy-O'Connor was asked to become the first Roman Catholic bishop in the Lords since the Reformation but turned the offer down.

Last month he revealed that the Pope was against the idea. He said the Vatican wanted to stop bishops in Africa and South America from joining their countries' own governments and did not want to set a precedent in the United Kingdom

Lucy Kinder - The Telegraph