

Gospel of Life Week

SOLUTIONS TO CRIME & CONFLICT

"THE DIGNITY OF HUMAN LIFE MUST NEVER BE TAKEN AWAY, EVEN IN THE CASE OF SOMEONE WHO HAS DONE GREAT EVIL. MODERN SOCIETY HAS THE MEANS OF PROTECTING ITSELF, WITHOUT DEFINITELY DENYING CRIMINALS THE CHANCE TO REFORM."

-POPE JOHN PAUL II, EVANGELIUM VITAE, 1995



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BEHIND THE BARS



With 2.3 million prisoners, the United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world. To put this into perspective, that is slightly less than the population of the entire state of Nevada. Why so high? There are many theories, citing outdated laws to disproportionately long sentences. Combined, they add up to the fact that the American prison system has lost its commitment to justice and rehabilitation.

When we sentence men, women and children to be incarcerated, we send them to a prison system in which they are at an exponentially greater risk of becoming victims of violence and suicide. On any given day in the United States, an estimated 600 people are raped in prison and roughly 80,000 incarcerated adults and youth are held in conditions of solitary confinement, a practice considered by many as a form of torture. These statistics are shocking but none of these numbers conveys the ripple effect this system has in our society in creating broken individuals, families, neighborhoods and communities.

Our corrections system costs us tens of billions of dollars a year but is neither effective in rehabilitating offenders, nor in deterring crime. Haunted by institutionalized racism and the criminalization of mental illness, prison dehumanizes and hardens its residents rather than “correcting” them. Three quarters of all inmates are re-arrested within five years of their release, with more than half (56.7%) arrested by the end of the first year.

Our current prison system offers no positive alternative to the gangs and substance abuse inmates use to cope with prison life and the dead-end opportunities they face upon release.

DEMANDS OF DIGNITY

Catholic teaching offers a unique perspective on crime and punishment. It begins with the recognition that the dignity of the human person applies to both victims and offenders. It affirms our commitment to comfort and support victims and their families. It also acknowledges the God-given dignity of every human life, even those who do great harm.

"The dignity of human life must never be taken away, even in the case of someone who has done great evil. Modern society has the means of protecting itself, without definitively denying criminals the chance to reform."

--Pope John Paul II,
Evangelium Vitae, 1995

How can we provide these persons the opportunity to experience the unconditional love of God? How can we meet their needs by counseling their broken spirits and addressing their addictions and mental illness?

Brian Nelson spent 12 years of his life in prison for a robbery and murder he committed at age 17. Much of that time was spent in solitary confinement, in an 8 by 10 foot cell with no connection to any other prisoner or the outside world. Approximately 80,000 prisoners are held in solitary confinement in America.

Some countries, including Norway, are attempting to look at the prison experience in a different way. There is a growing international movement to treat the incarcerated with respect and an eye toward rehabilitation that will move them toward re-entry into the world more effectively.

One prison in Norway, Bastoy Island, looks more like a resort than a prison with inmates given a great deal of freedom, but responsibility as well.

"In closed prisons we keep them locked up for some years and then let them back out, not having had any real responsibility for working or cooking. In the law, being sent to prison is nothing to do with putting you in a terrible prison to make you suffer. The punishment is that you lose your freedom. If we treat people like animals when they are in prison they are likely to behave like animals. Here we pay attention to you as human beings." --Arne Nilsen, Governor at the controversial Bastoy Island prison in Norway, where the reoffending rate for released prisoners is just 16%

RETRIBUTION VS REHABILITATION

Retribution focuses on punishing the offender. Restorative justice, by contrast, focuses on the needs of victims and their communities, and seeks to repair broken relationships and heal harm. Restorative justice is at the core of the Gospel. It witnesses to the dignity of all human life, guilty and innocent

To offer the convicted person a path to restoration is seen by some as being “soft on crime”. There is a very human desire to see criminals treated poorly because they “deserve it” or they should “know what it feels like”.

Our Christian faith invites us to see a different option. Restorative justice calls the convicted person to do the hard work of justice, shoulder responsibility and seek forgiveness. It can help repair broken relationships with victims and communities, and address the issues that led them to their actions.

Restorative justice done well recognizes the dignity of the person and seeks rehabilitation. It ensures that offenders are held accountable and remain part of the community while they serve their sentence. Restorative justice programs prove that broken people can be rehabilitated through encounter and prayer.

Thankfully, in some prisons, a system is established for restoration that respects the dignity of the prisoners, something they do not lose based on their actions. At the Maryland Correctional Institution for Women, some inmates work at a horse rescue farm, where they maintain the grounds and even work with the horses. The Missouri Department of Corrections puts some inmates to work giving obedience training to shelter dogs. In other locations, victim-offender dialogues have helped both sides of the crime come to terms with what happened.



“The jailed offenders receive no shortened sentences or any kind of credit for their involvement. No dialogue occurs if an offender doesn't fully accept responsibility for the crime. What they do get is an opportunity to think more deeply about what they've done” (Grits for Breakfast).

THE PENALTY OF DEATH

In his encyclical The Gospel of Life, Pope John Paul II called us to choose to be “unconditionally pro life” (no. 28). During his last visit to the United States, he referenced the encyclical in a speech in St. Louis: “The new evangelization calls for followers of Christ who are unconditionally pro-life: who will proclaim, celebrate and serve the Gospel of life in every situation. A sign of hope is the increasing recognition that the dignity of human life must never be taken away, even in the case of someone who has done great evil. Modern society has the means of protecting itself, without definitively denying criminals the chance to reform.”

When we practice the works of mercy, graces are provided to the person who is doing them. Jesus said “give and you will receive”. When practicing the works of mercy, we are following the will of God, we are giving something from ourselves to others and our Lord will provide what we need.

When doing works of mercy, we are progressing in the way to heaven, because we are becoming more like Jesus, who is our model, he taught us how to treat others.

Christ words were: “do not store up treasures for yourselves on earth, where moth and woodworm destroy them and thieves can break and steal; but store up treasures for yourselves in heaven, where neither moth nor woodworm destroys them and thieves cannot break and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be too.” (Mt 6, 19 – 21)

When we follow this teaching of the Lord we change temporal goods for eternal ones, which are the ones really worthwhile.

Catholic teaching on human life is rooted in the belief that life is a gift from God that we must respect and protect.

Pope John Paul II looked at the situation of the modern world and made a very bold proclamation about the death penalty that has been taken up by the Catechism of the Catholic Church and the Vatican’s Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church.



Our fundamental respect for every human life and for God, who created each person in his image, requires that we choose not to end a human life in response to violent crimes if non-lethal options are available.

Moreover, at a time when respect for the sanctity of human life is undermined in many ways, the Church's opposition to the use of the death penalty is an important witness in support of a culture of life.

Pope Francis not only agrees with St JPII's statement, but also last October of 2018 banned the death penalty.



The death penalty, no matter how it is carried out, is, in itself, contrary to the Gospel, because a decision is voluntarily made to suppress a human life, which is always sacred in the eyes of the Creator and of whom, in the last analysis, only God can be the true judge and guarantor. Furthermore, in a modern "state of law, the death penalty represents a failure because it obliges the state to kill in the name of justice. On the other hand it is a method frequently used by "totalitarian regimes and fanatical groups" to do away with "political dissidents, minorities" and any other person deemed a threat to their power and to their goals. Human justice is imperfect" and the death penalty loses all legitimacy in penal systems where judicial error is possible."

Pope Francis, October 2018



The catechism now will read: "recourse to the death penalty on the part of legitimate authority, following a fair trial, was long considered an appropriate response to the gravity of certain crimes and an acceptable, albeit extreme, means of safeguarding the common good.

Today, however, there is an increasing awareness that the dignity of the person is not lost even after the commission of very serious crimes. In addition, a new understanding has emerged of the significance of penal sanctions imposed by the state. Lastly, more effective systems of detention have been developed, which ensure the due protection of citizens but, at the same time, do not definitively deprive the guilty of the possibility of redemption".

TAKE ACTION

- **Pray** for victims of crime and their loved ones, for those awaiting execution and their families, for our leaders, for those who work in the criminal justice system, and for one another—that we might help bring an end to the culture of violence and build a culture of life in our nation and throughout the world.
- **Reach out** to the families of those whose lives have been taken away through violence, and assure them of the Church's support, compassion, and care, ministering to their spiritual, physical, and emotional needs. Support efforts to provide hope and help for the families of murder victims.
- **Advocate** for public policies that better protect society from perpetrators of violence and do not resort to the death penalty.
- **Learn** more about Catholic teaching on the death penalty, and seriously reflect on and re-examine our own attitudes and positions on the death penalty.
- **Educate** people in parishes, schools, religious education programs, universities, and seminaries about Catholic teaching on the death penalty and the criminal justice system.
- **Act** by continuing to advocate in state legislatures, in the Congress, in the courts, and in the public square. Urge public officials to support measures that restrict the death penalty or provide alternatives; and in a particular way, ask those who make decisions about the death penalty to take their own opportunities to bring an end to its use. Work to reform the criminal justice system to make it more just, more effective, and more “restorative” to victims, offenders, and communities.
- **Change** the debate and decisions on the use of the death penalty by building a constituency for life, not death, and by calling on lawmakers to lead,
 - not follow—to defend life, not take it away.



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- What is the difference between retribution and rehabilitation?
- Which of these are we called to as Christians?
- What is the goal of Restorative Justice?
- What is the role of solitary confinement? Is it just?
- Is there ever a need for torture?
- What is Catholic teaching about the Death Penalty? Is it ever morally allowed? What about right now in our current culture?



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