

RECONCILIATION IN THE CONTEXT OF PRISON MINISTRIES

Jesuit Restorative Justice Initiative: A Pastoral Ministry of Accompaniment and Advocacy

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Introduction

The punitive spirit of the United States criminal justice system infuses a “lockdown craze...now incarcerating more than two million citizens,”¹ “prison construction... among the top two or three largest budget items in many states,”² and mandatory sentencing such as “three strikes and you’re out”³ or life without parole (*LWOP*) for juveniles. *Life without parole* means that these juvenile offenders will die in prison with absolutely no opportunity to ask for parole.

International human rights law strictly prohibits *LWOP* for juveniles (Human Rights Watch), and the United States is the only country in the world to sentence youth to life in prison with no opportunity for parole; statistics show that only 1% of these youths serving life sentences parole out.⁴ In California’s juvenile justice system, it is a daily occurrence for courts to sentence juveniles to life in prison and, what is even more cruel, to sentence juveniles to *LWOP*. Diametrically opposed to Christianity’s call to reconciliation, these methods of criminal justice lead to brokenness.

As co-chaplain and pastoral minister at the Barry J. Nidorf Juvenile Hall (*Sylmar*), we hear stories of deep remorse from juveniles and recognise their profound desire for healing. This story of a prisoner, for instance, reveals God’s healing presence. Jacob (not his real name), is a 29-year-old member of a Catholic faith community inside a California State Prison. Even though still a youth, the State of California tried Jacob as an adult and sentenced him to “50 years to life.” Jacob will most likely die in prison. Here, in his own words, is Jacob’s story, which he entitled “Child of the Damned.”

You see, by the time I had killed that man, I no longer believed in hope and love... Religious people spoke to me about love, but their actions proved to me they were liars, and further solidified my belief that love doesn’t exist...

Currently [I am] serving 50 years to life, since I was 17 years old...I so desperately want to hurl hope into the drab, concrete floor and allow myself to rot away in despair.

¹Mark Lewis Taylor, *The Executed God: The Way of the Cross in Lockdown America* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), xiii.

²T. Richard Snyder, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Punishment*, (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 8.

³USCCB, “Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice,” <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/criminal.shtml>.

⁴<http://www.fairsentencingforyouth.org/legislation/what-is-sb399/>

Isolated in my juvenile hall cell, I read the Gospels. A living God Jesus really is. There in my cell, I encountered another person who said he loved me, but most importantly, I knew he was telling me the truth.

I guess I want people – free people – to take a step back and honestly think about us prisoners... First is the task of bringing to light a prisoner's plight; second is the task of extending mercy to [those] who can be reconciled.

After twelve years in prison, Jacob's involvement with Catholic prison chaplains has given him the courage to speak about his plight and to expose the lasting damage and human cost of extreme punishment for youth.

Following Jacob's lead, I embarked on a ministry of healing and reconciliation through the *Jesuit Restorative Justice Initiative (JRJI)*, a ministry of the California Province that provides pastoral care and sacramental access for the incarcerated and for victims of crime. This ministry has inspired JRJI to organise diverse Jesuit ministries in an enterprise of extending mercy to juveniles who, because of "developmental immaturity,"⁵ retain a unique capacity to grow.

From facilitating Ignatian-based retreats in prison to organising Jesuit ministries for advocacy, JRJI's *project of reconciliation* begins by listening to the stories of prisoners and their families, and it also attends to the agonised voices of victims who call for healing. These stories bring to light the ripple effect of a justice system that offers no opportunity for reconciliation, a denial that ultimately deprives persons of their human dignity.

The Prisoner's Plight and Stories of Brokenness

Rachel is the mother of a formerly incarcerated youth and a member of a support group for parents of incarcerated children. Her story describes the devastation that extreme punishment caused her family.

At the age of 17, my son was arrested for a crime he did not commit and was faced with the uncertainty of serving a life sentence. After seeing how the juvenile (in)justice system works and how it devastates so many families, as it did mine, I have been committed to trying to help other families walk through this very difficult journey.

With no room for reconciliation, extreme punishment victimises juveniles and their families as it rips apart relationships. Victimisation does not preclude a deep commitment to ameliorate the severity of sentencing guidelines for juveniles.

Aqeela, a victim of crime and violence, is best known for creating the 1992 peace agreement between longtime Los Angeles gang rivals, the Bloods and the Crips. No novice to death, Aqeela's son Terrell was gunned down in a drive-by shooting on his first Christmas visit from college. In his brokenness, Aqeela discovered that "the wound can become the gift and the tragedy can become the opportunity for grace."

⁵Elizabeth S. Scott and Laurence Steinberg, *Rethinking Juvenile Justice*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 17.

These stories serve as the foundation for *JRJI's* reconciliation project that empowers Jesuit ministries to share in Jesus' mission of healing through *Juvenile Justice Week of Faith and Healing (Faith and Healing)*. *Faith and Healing* is a reconciliation project that organises diverse ministries throughout California in a coordinated initiative to reform cruel sentencing guidelines for juveniles and propose major structural changes for fashioning a justice system that restores human relationships. Through *prayer, educatio, and advocacy*, this project draws attention to the destruction of relationships caused by cruel punishment and elicits a pastoral response of reconciliation.

Fernando Franco SJ, the Director of Social Justice for the universal Society of Jesus, expressed his support for *Faith and Healing* thus:

First, the theme of reconciliation and restorative justice has become one of the central themes of our mission today... the mission you are promoting involves the collaborative effort of many persons engaged in diverse ministries. GC 35 has insisted strongly on the need to respond to the complex challenges of today's world in an integrated and holistic manner... your apostolic endeavour stresses rightly the importance of directing our combined efforts to change present State policies and practices.

The Task of Extending Mercy and Juvenile Justice Week of Faith and Healing

Faith and Healing, born 26-28 October 2009, from the stories of Jacob, Rachel and Aqeela, marks the beginning of the California Province's *Social Ministries Conference (SMC)*. *Faith and Healing* is an event planned for 15-21 February 2010, and, seeking inputs from *SMC* member organisations, builds upon the *SMC* and Jesuit vision. It is a response to the GC 35 vision of reconciliation,⁶ which calls for Jesuit ministries to plunge towards new frontiers and join Jesus in reconciling humanity to God, to one another and with all creation.

Faith and Healing is a project of sharing stories. Support from leaders of partner organisations allows this reconciliation project to be played out on multiple fronts. Enthusiastic support from diverse organisations, including a university and a philanthropic foundation, shows the promise of *Faith and Healing*. Santa Clara University's President, Michael Engh SJ, has reflected on how the stories at the *SMC* evoked his pastoral response for juveniles, "I toured San Jose's Juvenile Hall. I hope I can figure out a way to...keep my pastoral ministry active in some small way, and ground myself in the deeper social reality of the youth," Engh said.

Mary Ellen, a programme officer from a Catholic foundation described the *SMC* stories as a catalyst for reforming the juvenile justice system. In her reflection she said, "I wonder if we all might look back... and say, 'the Kingdom of God is like a small group of people, gathering at a conference to learn and pray about juvenile justice together, and that group sparked off a movement

⁶<http://www.sjweb.info/35/documents/Decrees.pdf>

that changed everything – in the prisons and in the church.’” The reconciliation project shows how important story-telling is to the work of restorative justice.

Using restorative justice principles to heal broken relationships means creating the conditions for dialogue that allow victims, offenders and the wider community to tell their stories of the harm done and together imagine the healing that could happen. The liturgical life of the Christian community exemplifies how reconciliation is dialogue, an act of proclamation and response. *Faith and Healing* honours dialogue – the proclamation of brokenness from the stories of Jacob, Rachel and Aqeela, and the response of healing through prayer, education and advocacy.

The work of *JRJI* follows the revolutionary heart of Jesus where juveniles, despite the severity of their crime, have an irrevocable place in the heart of community. The spiritual life of juveniles is integral to *JRJI*'s effort to confront the sinful structure of extreme punishment. Prayer for juveniles in *Sylmar* incorporates a method of *guided meditation* as a healing ritual that touches the core of their hearts. David, not his real name, is a juvenile who participates in weekly guided meditations. David reflects, “The hardest part of going to court is seeing my family hurting... I see my victims and realise that they’ll never walk around the same... They’ll always look over their shoulders while just trying to make a living. I’m sorry that I caused them to live in fear.” Reconciliation honours these stories of remorse and works for redemption.

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