As a way of countering attitudes of defensiveness, fear, and indifference towards poor and marginalized people—all typical of a “throwaway culture”—Pope Francis has frequently called for a “culture of encounter.” He counsels that a culture of encounter is the only culture capable of building a better, more just, and fraternal world.

The Catholic Teach-in on Mass Incarceration, a two-hour program developed by JSRI, aims to create a culture of encounter between members of a faith community and people too often feared and marginalized—men and women who have served time in our nation’s vast carceral system. The heart of a Catholic Teach-in on Mass Incarceration is “listening circles,” where formerly incarcerated people share their life stories with participants. Additionally, during small group discussions, participants are encouraged to address criminal justice reform needs in their communities. I will describe here how to organize a Catholic Teach-in on Mass Incarceration in the hope that our readers will consider holding Teach-ins in their own parishes or schools.

The first step in organizing a Teach-in is identifying formerly incarcerated people willing to share their often painful life stories with complete strangers. There are several organizations in New Orleans composed of formerly incarcerated people working on criminal justice reform issues eager to talk about their lives as a way to educate the public and prevent young people from repeating their mistakes. JSRI has partnered with members of Women Determined and Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans’ Cornerstone Builders on nine Teach-ins since 2017. To show our appreciation of speakers’ time and effort, JSRI provides modest honorariums to Teach-in guest speakers.

—Continued on page 2
The ideal location for a Teach-in is a large room with good acoustics. All documents and materials needed to hold a Teach-in—including a PowerPoint presentation developed by JSRI, a script for the moderator, an agenda, prayers, a question guide for listening circles, fliers, and evaluation forms—are available for download on the racism page of our website under the projects tab and can be edited to adapt to one’s community. An LCD projector and screen are recommended to make use of the PowerPoint presentation. JSRI has developed. One or two guest speakers (formerly incarcerated persons) should be seated at round tables with four to eight participants each. JSRI has held all its Teach-ins in the evening to accommodate speakers’ work schedules. After the listening circles—which last about 45 minutes—conclude, the moderator asks participants to share what is in their hearts with the guest speakers, which is often a profound sense of gratitude for trusting them with their stories, as well as sorrow for what led to their imprisonment. Participants are then given ten minutes to discuss a list of action steps to end mass incarceration, such as partnering with the guest speakers’ organization on campaigns or starting a criminal justice reform advocacy group at their school or parish. For the closing prayer, usually one of the guest speakers leads the group in singing Amazing Grace. Then participants and speakers are urged to complete a short evaluation form to obtain feedback on what they experienced during the Teach-in to help organizers improve future Teach-ins.

A typical JSRI Catholic Teach-in on Mass Incarceration begins with a powerful prayer written by the late Sr. Dianna Ortiz, OSU, asking participants to reflect on how their fears and indifference may have contributed to the scandal of mass incarceration. After welcoming remarks from a formerly incarcerated person and the church pastor (if it is held at a parish), the moderator for the Teach-in then provides historical context to mass incarceration. This consists of a brief overview of the policies and attitudes that led to the exponential growth in U.S. incarceration rates, with the moderator referencing several graphs (on the PowerPoint) which compare sentence lengths and number of incarcerated persons now and before the age of mass incarceration began in the 1970s, as well as other important data.

This brief opening is followed by an overview of the following Catholic Social Teaching values and principles to guide an understanding of criminal justice issues: respect for the dignity and sanctity of human life; our obligation to uphold the common good; the Gospel imperative for mercy, forgiveness, and hope; and the need to protect the integrity of families—the basic unit of society.

Next, the moderator reviews a set of basic ground rules for table discussions, including respecting confidentiality and avoiding side conversations. Each table should have a volunteer member of the host faith community who was briefly trained to serve as the table discussion facilitator. All participants should have a name tag—first names only. After the table facilitator asks everyone to introduce themselves and leads a short icebreaker, participants have arrived at what makes the Catholic Teach-in on Mass Incarceration so unique and powerful: small listening circles where formerly incarcerated guest speakers share their life journeys. The listening circles often feel like sacred moments, as participants lean closer to the guest speakers to catch every word while the formerly incarcerated persons bravely speak their truth, in the hope that others will not have to go through what they experienced.

From Teach-in evaluations we have learned how important the face-to-face encounters are for participants: “It was super eye-opening and has really inspired me to take action against hyper-incarceration.” “I never met a formerly incarcerated person before to hear their stories. This reminds me of the humanity of the people society locks away.” “I didn’t know that things like that happened.”

Jesuit priest and journalist Thomas Reese, S.J., recently wrote that listening is a “healing art,” and “a sign of respect to those who feel left out.” Evaluations from guest speakers reflect this truth: “The entire experience was uplifting and very ‘Catholic!’” “It was a great opportunity to share the experiences some ex-offenders have to deal with.” “I didn’t know how much people cared.”

Please contact Sue Weishar at 504-864-7749 or sweishar@loyno.edu with any questions about how to organize a Catholic Teach-in on Mass Incarceration at your school or parish.

ENDNOTES

1 JSRI has also developed a Catholic Teach-in on Immigration. See JSQ Fall 2014 Teach In_0.pdf (loyno.edu)

2 Most Teach-ins we have organized have been held from 6:30 PM to 8:30 PM. We have asked the hosting church or school to provide light refreshments in case a guest speaker or participant did not have time to eat dinner.

3 To help guest speakers talk about their lives, the table facilitator begins by asking the guest speaker at her table agreed-upon questions about life in prison, reasons why the person was sent to prison, the challenges the guest speaker has faced coming home, and the role faith has played in the guest speaker’s life journey. If the guest speakers are able to tell their stories without such prompting from the table facilitators, then facilitators have been advised to “get out of the way” to allow the speakers to tell their stories in their own ways.

Facing the COVID-19 pandemic, political polarization, entrenched racism, and persistent violence, it seems easy or expedient to withdraw from the world. As Pope Francis advised young people:

Take care not to yield to the temptation of a disenchancement which paralyzes the intellect and the will, or that apathy which is a radical form of pessimism about the future. These attitudes end either in a flight from reality towards vain utopias, or else in selfish isolation and a cynicism deaf to the cry for justice, truth, and humanity which rises up around us and within us.1

When so tempted, we must recall our tradition of courage.

Courage, David Hollenbach, S.J., writes, is a Christian virtue that is not just strength of will or fearlessness, but is “strength of will in the pursuit of justice.”2 Courage takes two forms. The first is endurance of “those suffering persecution for justice sake.” The second form is one of daring, involving passion—and even anger—inspiring action for justice. This courage empowers our commitment to the poor and to social change when the going is difficult, when efforts meet with little success, or even when we experience retaliation from others.

Courage, however, is not enough. What our world and our Church need so badly is courageous leadership. Far too many leaders are followers—tracking the polls, press approval, the trends, or their party.

In contrast, Henri Nouwen calls for Christian leadership reflecting the realities of pain, struggle, and opposition: the task of future Christian leaders is not to make a little contribution to the solution of the pains and tribulations of their time, but to identify and announce the ways in which Jesus is leading God’s people out of slavery, through the desert to a new land of freedom. Christian leaders have the arduous task of responding to personal struggles, family conflicts, national calamities, and international tensions with an articulate faith in God’s real presence.3

This kind of leadership, Nouwen continues, requires resisting all the ways in which society and culture would seduce us to accept the status quo or the comforts promised to those who refuse to “rock the boat”:

They have to say “no” to every form of fatalism, defeatism, accidentalism or incidentalism which make people believe that statistics are telling us the truth. They have to say “no” to every form of despair in which human life is seen as a pure matter of good or bad luck. They have to say “no” to sentimental attempts to make people develop a spirit of resignation or stoic indifference in the face of the unavoidability of pain, suffering, and death. In short, they have to say “no” to the secular world and proclaim in unambiguous terms that the incarnation of God’s Word, through whom all things came into being, has made even the smallest event of human history into Kairos, that is, an opportunity to be led deeper into the heart of Christ.4

We may call it courage, determination, or perseverance. Pope Francis calls it carrying the cross:

This is not an ornamental cross or an ideological cross, but it is the cross of life, the cross of one’s duty, the cross of making sacrifices for others with love—for parents, for children, for the family, for friends, and even for enemies—the cross of being ready to be in solidarity with the poor, to strive for justice and peace.5

Our call is to bring this courage in abundance into a world desperate for courageous leaders.

ENDNOTES

4 Ibid.
In the previous *JustSouth Quarterly*, we looked at some of the reasons for our current polarized political climate. In this article we’ll look at some potential solutions. In our world of unceasing caustic remarks, sensationalism, and demonization, is there anything that can be done?

University of Maryland political scientist Lilliana Mason, in her book *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*, presents four ideas for healing the divide: increasing cross-party contact, establishing and modeling better social norms, using affirming statements in political conversations, and employing superordinate goals.¹ We should keep in mind that these tools are not meant to make our country more politically moderate or to persuade others to abandon radical positions. They are meant only to help heal our acrid, demonizing political environment. Healing this divide, however, will take hard work and commitment.

**Increasing Cross-Party Contact**

Mason notes that various scholars since 1954 have pointed to personal contact as being an effective way of reducing outgroup prejudice. A group of psychologists in 2011, for example, published a report finding that intergroup contact, and intergroup friendships in particular, helped reduce prejudice through empathy and reduced anxiety.² This could help heal the rifts between Democrats and Republicans, as well.

More recent studies have confirmed these findings. In her work *Strangers in Their Own Land*, Berkeley sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild spent five years getting to know rural Louisianans with profound political differences from her. She wrote that she was trying to understand the “empathy walls” that exist in our society: those walls that are obstacles “to deep understanding of another person” and “that can make us feel indifferent or even hostile to those who hold different beliefs or whose childhood is rooted in different circumstances.”³ By the end of her time in Louisiana, Hochschild had developed friendships and relationships of shared empathy with these conservative Southerners. Her book portrayed what most of us probably know to be true: that getting to know one another personally helps.
In its October 2019 report Divided by Design, E Pluribus Unum reported that a majority of its respondents found festivals and sporting events to be particularly helpful for bringing people together across economic and racial lines. Catholics already have a great tool to help bring about these kinds of events: our parishes, dioceses, and schools. Even if our parishes have become somewhat segregated politically—into the “traditional” parishes versus the “social justice” ones—we can still encourage attendance at diocesan-wide events, or even invite other parishes or Catholic schools near ours to co-host events with us in order to bring different groups of people together.

Social Norms
Party leaders could stop some of the name-calling, demonization, and win-at-all-costs mentality by modeling different behavior. Mason asks:

What if the leaders of the Democratic and Republican parties decided to take on a tolerant rhetoric toward the opposing team? What if party prototypes started discussing real differences rather than demonizing their opponents? What if party opinion leaders (of both parties) started talking about politics by commending compromise and acknowledging the humanity and validity of the opposing team? She notes on the same page, however, that “party leaders are incentivized to maintain conflict and incivility” by the votes and media attention such sensationalism and demonization attract. As voters, we can demand otherwise and stop paying attention when the name-calling begins.

Catholic leaders could model this behavior as well. Unfortunately, far too many priests and bishops have participated in this acrid environment via social media. All Catholics could help by rejecting this behavior and demanding civility and Christian love from our leaders, as well as trying our best to model civil and loving behavior in our own lives.

Affirming the Opponent
Mason references numerous studies that show that low self-esteem and insecurity about one’s social status can cause people to dig their heels more deeply into their “teams” in order to feel more secure. Reminding others of their worth can help to ease this problem. For example, in a conversation with another person who does not share my views on a particular social issue, I can ask them about their own life experiences that have led them to their position. I can point out the parts of their story that resonate with my own, and I can affirm that their opinions matter and that their pain is real. This does not necessarily mean compromising my values. It simply helps develop a safe atmosphere that facilitates a productive conversation.

Our faith gives us a strong foundation upon which to practice these affirmations. Even our political opponents whose positions we find to be completely unjust and harmful are still God’s children. We are called to love one another, including our enemies (Mt 5:43-48; Jn 13:34-35). Affirming my opponent’s value as a child of God and recognizing that sin and grace are working in both of our lives can be a powerful way to enter into a conversation with empathy, respect, and mutual love.

Superordinate Goals
Working together on a superordinate goal—one based on shared values that transcend one’s team—has also been an effective way of bringing people together and humanizing one’s opponents. Such a method can be abused, however, when group unity is invoked in order to suppress dissent or ignore injustices. Finding an effective way for Democrats and Republicans to come together to work on some shared project could be an effective tool for reducing outgroup prejudice.

It is no secret that Catholics are not one of the “sorted identities” that have all ended up in one party. We are as split as the rest of the country. But we have a very significant shared identity: our faith. We could start small, such as different parishes coming together to work on a joint service project. But if politically liberal Catholics and politically conservative Catholics could rely instead on their shared Catholic identity to build bridges with one another, we could model for our country how to reduce polarization in society.

Healing our divide will not be easy. If we want our country to change, then, rather than bemoaning its problems, we must begin practicing these values in our own lives. Only then will we create a space in which people feel comfortable coming together to build a more just world—a goal shared by all of us.

ENDNOTES
5 Mason, 133.
The poorest countries in the world are lagging in the COVID-19 vaccinations of their citizens. A number of developing countries have yet to even begin a vaccination program.\(^1\) Sadly, this comes as one of the least surprising stories of this past miserable year.

Our economic system, our public policies, our world are all geared to serve best those who expect to be well served. We have become more aware in recent years about white privilege and male privilege. It is time we also address the insidious problem of First World privilege.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, there were already many serious maladies that had been sweeping through the developing world, often with little notice and almost no alarm.

Tuberculosis is mostly a preventable and curable disease. Yet, some 1.4 million people worldwide—mostly in the poorest countries—died from it in 2019.\(^2\)

Malaria is also a preventable and curable disease. It takes over 400,000 lives each year, over 90% in Africa.\(^3\)

Diarrheal diseases, which are relatively easy to deal with here in the U.S. and other wealthy countries, kill nearly 2200 children every day and is the sixth leading cause of death in the developing world.\(^4\)

Many deaths from these illnesses have a contributing factor: hunger and malnutrition. Bodies become so weakened from lack of proper nutrition that they can easily succumb to illness that often, in the rich world, would be not much more than an inconvenience.

About 9 million people, mostly children, die from hunger and hunger-related illness each year.\(^5\) That is more than the official body count so far from COVID-19.\(^6\) Yet, the millions that perish from lack of food EVERY YEAR get very little attention, let alone an urgent global response to this unnecessary mass suffering and death.

And unnecessary it certainly is. The world produces more than enough food to feed everyone on this planet, and more food could be produced.\(^7\) The workings of the market along with staggering indifference are killing our poorest sisters and brothers.
It should also be noted that genuine improvements in recent years in global poverty and hunger are now being reversed due to the pandemic.9

So, is it any wonder that given this history and cruel social reality that the poorest are left to suffer the most during the pandemic? It was, in fact, very predictable. Nevertheless, I allowed myself just a bit of optimism early in the COVID crisis. I thought that perhaps...perhaps...the world community would see how inextricably linked we all are. Illness, suffering, and death in one place can easily hopscotch around the world. All of us across the globe were frightened and felt, at least a bit, a sense of solidarity. We were in this fight together.

I even thought that we in the developed world would become more sensitive to global health and that it would push us to work together to solve this problem on a global level. I also believed that maybe, when this crisis is over, we would be more sensitized to long-term public health crises in the developing world—tuberculosis, malaria, malnutrition—and work as never before to eradicate them.

It is too early to say for sure if my hopes will be dashed, but the signs at this point are not good. Just look at the vaccine rollout I alluded to at the beginning of this article. Below are the doses administered per 100 of the population by select countries (as of June 2, 2021):10

- United Arab Emirates: 133
- United Kingdom: 98
- United States: 89
- Canada: 64
- Germany: 62
- India: 16

At the furthest end of the spectrum are the nearly dozen countries that were still waiting in May for vaccines to arrive. These countries include Chad, Burundi, Burkina Faso, and Eritrea.10

“Countries and regions with the highest incomes,” one report noted this spring, “are getting vaccinated more than 30 times faster than those with the lowest (incomes).”11 And it can be added that the areas of the world least likely to have access to vaccines also have limited resources to care for those who get sick.

COVAX is an international effort led by the World Health Organization and others to help assure equitable access to vaccines worldwide. Contributing to COVAX are governments, international organizations, and philanthropies. Their work is vital to protecting the most vulnerable and ultimately to stopping the pandemic. However, progress has been slower than hoped.12

Fewer than 1% of all COVID vaccine doses administered worldwide have gone into the arms of people living in low income countries.13

There are also disparities within countries. Communities of color and the poor in the United States have been vaccinated at lower rates. According to a report in the American Journal of Managed Care this past spring, “The disproportionate rate at which racial minorities contracted, suffered complications from, and died of COVID-19 in the past year led to public health officials pushing for an equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines even before any were FDA-approved. But now, data show racial disparities in COVID-19 vaccinations are evident throughout the country.”14

There are indications that the racial vaccination gap may be slowly improving.15 Hopefully this will continue, as the Biden administration and many state and local authorities appear to have prioritized vaccine equity. But that is precisely what is needed: a genuine commitment followed by concrete action to assure equity in the distribution of life-saving medications, both here and around the world. The problem will not fix itself.

Pope Francis has spoken of “the virus of individualism” that “makes us indifferent to the suffering of others.” And he spoke of “a variant of this virus,” which he identified as “closed nationalism, which prevents...an internationalism of vaccines.” In the same talk this spring, Pope Francis also spoke of the problem of putting the laws of the market and intellectual property rights ahead of “the laws of love and the health of humanity.”16

The Pope has clearly urged vaccine equity in very strong terms and believes this principle must trump patents and profits, which only protect the privileged at great expense to the most vulnerable.

A fundamental principle of Catholic Social Teaching is the advancement of the common good. How we act both individually and collectively, in this country and around the world, to end this pandemic and rebuild our communities must be done with an intense focus on the common good. Our physical, mental, economic, and spiritual health depends on it.

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ENDNOTES
THE MISSION OF THE JESUIT SOCIAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE

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