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 long 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 complete strangers. 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.

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.

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.

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.