



Seal of the
Society of Jesus

Catholic Social Teaching and Criminal Justice

By the Rev. Fred Kammer, S.J.

Consideration of prison construction, imprisonment practices, and imprisonment of immigrants should begin with principles drawn from Catholic Social Teaching (CST). The most comprehensive authoritative U.S. treatment of these themes was the 2000 statement by the U.S. bishops titled *Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Punishment*.¹ The most applicable principles drawn from CST are human dignity and the common good. The **common good** is undermined by both “criminal behavior that threatens the lives and dignity of others and by policies that seem to give up on those who have broken the law.”

Human dignity focuses the morally concerned person on the victim of crime and the offender, but also on those involved in various roles within the criminal justice process. The bishops call for strong support to make the justice system more responsive to the concerns of victims who too often are neglected in the process or their anger and pain is exploited to support punitive policies. Attention must be paid to their needs of healing and compassion, inclusion in the proceedings against their offenders, and the help of the faith community in recovering their dignity as they search for genuine justice. The bishops urge the widespread adoption of “innovative programs of restorative justice that provide the opportunity for mediation between victims and offenders and offer restitution for crimes committed.”

Offenders too retain their human dignity no matter what. Their rights must be respected and defended in the justice process. In the penal system this means conditions that comport with human dignity including: food, clothing, shelter, personal safety, timely medical care, opportunity for religious worship, education, and meaningful work adequate to the conditions of human dignity.

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Too often our prison systems have abandoned the traditional corrections goal of rehabilitation. Prisons have been moved to distant rural locations that prevent family support and visits with inmates and undermine relationships with prisoners’ families and children.

In response, the bishops cite the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and its teaching that civil punishment for crimes must serve three principle purposes: (1) the preservation and protection of the common good of society, (2) the restoration of public order, and (3) the restoration or conversion of the offender.

To these they add the importance of *redress*, the repair of the harm done to the victims and society, which often is neglected in current justice systems.

In keeping with human dignity, the bishops urge drug treatment in communities and in jails and prisons, an end to “three strikes and you’re out” policies and rigid minimum sentences, efforts to address racism in society and in the system, the importance of strong family life, community-based prevention and responses to crime, challenging a culture of violence, and insisting on the rehabilitative purposes of incarceration that encourage and reward efforts to change behaviors and attitudes and promote needed education and employment and life-skills. Society’s resources should move away from more and more imprisonment and toward prevention, addiction and mental health treatment, parole, and probation programs. We must insist upon a vision of social justice and the common good that undergirds the possibility of a fair criminal justice system.

ENDNOTE

- 1 U.S. Catholic Bishops, *Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Punishment*, in *Origins*, Vol. 30: No. 25, November 30, 2000.



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