

JustSouth Monthly

JSRI Perspectives on FAITH DOING JUSTICE

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The Cruel Consequences of Hyper-Incarceration

The case of Thomas Johnson

by Sue Weishar, PhD

JSRI Future Activities

May 31-June 2

Fr. Kammer is an invited participant in the Convening of US Academic Centers on Catholic Social Thought with Cardinal Peter Turkson and the Vatican Dicastery of Promoting Integral Human Development at Georgetown University.

June 11-13

Fr. Kammer will function as the commentator during the general sessions of the 2017 General Assembly of the Catholic Health Association here in New Orleans.

JSRI Recent Activities

May 23

Fr. Kammer participated in the Mission Committee meeting of Christus Health in Dallas.

May 15

Fr. Kammer participated in the board meeting for the Jesuit Volunteer Corps/USA in Chicago.

May 15

Dr. Weishar led a workshop on the Catholic Response to the Death Penalty at St. Anthony of Padua Church in New Orleans.

May 13

Fr. Kammer presided and preached at the 2017 Baccalaureate Mass for the Loyola Institute for Ministry.

May 12

Ms. Baudouin and Dr. Weishar attended a faith-based shareholders meeting on private prison reform in Nashville.

May 12

Ms. Chamberlain received the 2017 Ignatian Award for the Outstanding Graduate Student presented at the Loyola Baccalaureate Mass.

May 10

Fr. Kammer chaired the Ignatian Solidarity Network award ceremony in Washington, DC, honoring Patricia McGuire, President of Trinity Washington University.

May 2 & 9

Dr. Weishar participated in two visioning sessions of the New Orleans Interfaith Sanctuary Movement at First Grace Methodist Church.

April 30-May 2

Fr. Kammer, Dr. Weishar, Ms. Chamberlain, board member Sal Longoria, and College of Law Professor Hiroko Kusuda participated in the social justice orientation in New Orleans for

I met Thomas Johnson* in Ronnie Moore's office at Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans (CCANO) on a rainy Wednesday recently. [Ronnie, a long-time civil rights activist](#), founded [Cornerstone Builders at CCANO](#) seven years ago. The program helps formerly incarcerated men and women re-enter society through service projects and also provides immediate help to those who have just been released from prison, including shelter, employment, and a support network.

Thomas arrived at Ronnie's office after being released from a prison in North Louisiana early that same day. Because Ronnie had another meeting to attend, I offered to help. From 1999 to 2003 I ran a [re-entry program at CCANO for formerly incarcerated immigrants](#), so I knew "the ropes" and how important it is to provide someone assistance within the first 72 hours of leaving prison.



Members of Cornerstone Builders in prayer.

Thomas was released at one minute after midnight, a cruel but common practice at Louisiana penal institutions, which allows prison operators to collect a full-day's per diem. He left without a pair of shoes on his feet—just a cheap pair of plastic sandals—and a white plastic garbage bag to carry his few possessions. He was cold, tired, and hungry. In the trunk of my car I was able to find him a sweatshirt and a cloth bag, but my spare pair of tennis shoes were too small. Our first stop after Catholic Charities was the Greyhound bus station, conveniently located across the street, where we got lunch and a ticket to a small town in Georgia where Thomas planned to stay with an elderly relative, leaving early the next morning. Our next destination was Ozanam Inn, a homeless shelter on Camp Street where Thomas would stay that night.

Along the way to Ozanam Inn Thomas told me what landed him in prison. One evening after work at a French Quarter restaurant, a friend was driving Thomas to his apartment when their car was pulled over due to expired brake tags. A records check revealed that Thomas had failed to register with a parole officer when he moved to Louisiana many years earlier. For this infraction, despite over 15 years of crime-free living, he was sentenced to three years in prison.

Thomas briefly described his life in prison. He lived in a large dormitory room where it was loud all the time and young men were "always fighting." The food was terrible and the portions meager. He was always hungry and lost 60 pounds. There were no training or rehabilitation programs, so all there was to do all day was watch soap operas and reality shows. He made friends with two other gentlemen and they would often sit together and pray and talk. However, the guards became suspicious whenever people hung out together and would try and break up such friendships.

The morning Thomas was released he got down on his knees and thanked God he was finally leaving.

Thomas's case illustrates many of the problems with Louisiana's criminal justice system. Revocations of parole or probation account for nearly 60 percent of prison admissions a year, and over 85 percent of persons admitted have a primary offense that is not violent.[1] [Over half of offenders are housed in local prisons](#), which sheriffs run as cheaply as possible, offering few services. This lack of attention to rehabilitation and training programs contributes to a [43 percent rate of recidivism over five years](#).

At a Philadelphia jail in 2015 [Pope Francis told a group of prisoners](#), "Any society, any family that cannot share or take seriously the pain of its children, and

second-year novices of the Jesuit Central and Southern Province.

April 26

Dr. Weishar testified in opposition to an anti-sanctuary city bill at the Louisiana House Committee on the Administration of Criminal Justice.

views that pain as something normal or expected, is a society condemned to remain hostage to itself, prey to the very things which cause that pain." For decades Louisiana's criminal justice system has been held hostage to "tough on crime" policies that have ruined lives and decimated communities. For this to end we need to continue to hope, pray, and [advocate](#) that Louisiana legislators have the courage and wisdom to embrace major reforms outlined by the [Louisiana Justice Reinvestment Task Force](#) in the current legislative session.

*I have changed his name to protect his identity.

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[1] Pew Charitable Trusts, Louisiana Data Analysis Part II and Survey of Research, October 21, 2016, author's files.

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Office Phone: 504- 864-7746 | **E-mail:** jsri@loyno.edu | **Website:** www.loyno.edu/jsri

Mailing Address: 6363 St. Charles Avenue, Campus Box 94, New Orleans, LA 70118

6363 St. Charles Avenue | New Orleans, LA 70118

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