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Building a Culture of Encounter Ignatian Teach-In on Mass Incarceration

by Sue Weishar, Ph.D.

JSRI Future Activities

April 29

Fr. Fred Kammer will lead a seminar in New Orleans on Jesuit justice for the second year novices of Jesuit Central and Southern Province.

May 24

JSRI will co-sponsor an Interfaith Teach-In on Immigration at St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church. Click [here](#) for more information and to register.

JSRI Recent Activities

April 17-18

Fr. Kammer chaired the meeting of Ignatian Solidarity Network Board of Directors held in Los Angeles.

April 11

Dr. Nicholas Mitchell testified in support of HB162 to abolish the death penalty in Louisiana.

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.



Teach-In participants posed for a group photo after February 6 event.

The second JSRI-led Ignatian Teach-In on Mass Incarceration, held on a cool, rainy Tuesday night in early February, aimed to create a “culture of encounter” between the members of the Loyola community and people too often feared and marginalized—men and women who have served time in our state’s vast prison system. At the event six formerly incarcerated persons from Women Determined and Catholic Charities Cornerstone Builders Program bravely and generously shared their life stories with 48 students and faculty members seated at six round tables in the Audubon Room. Responses to evaluations of the event indicate that

April 11

The March 2018 Resolution of the Louisiana Interchurch Conference re-affirming LIC's opposition to the death penalty, which Dr. Sue Weishar helped draft, was presented to members of the Louisiana House committee on the Administration of Criminal Justice during a hearing to abolish the death penalty.

April 6-7

JSRI hosted its Advisory Board meeting at Loyola University New Orleans.

April 4

Fr. Kammer led a day of reflection on Catholic Social Teaching for the faculty and staff of Brother Martin High School in New Orleans.

April 2

Dr. Weishar was interviewed by a local news station on the chance of DACA's renewal and the need for comprehensive immigration reform.

March 21

Dr. Weishar participated in a Steering Committee meeting of the Greater New Orleans Interfaith Sanctuary Coalition.

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Loyola participants found it to be an "eye-opening" experience and were deeply moved by the powerful stories of women and men who had lost years of their lives languishing in Louisiana prisons because of our state's unjust and inhumane sentencing policies.

Students wrote: "This teach-in was incredibly worthwhile as it illuminated the horrifying experiences of incarcerated people and the shocking inner workings (or rather failings) of the criminal justice 'system.'"... "[The teach-in] made the problems personal and real." ... "I study criminal justice and talk about mass incarceration often, but being able to meet with someone who lived through the system humanized everything I've learned and solidified my beliefs that I want to dedicate my life to fighting injustices."... "I didn't know things like that happened."

In his latest book, *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship*, Fr. Greg Boyle, S.J., reflects on how Gospel Kinship "changes the game." The status quo of incessant judging, comparisons, and scapegoating is upended when we understand that we belong to each other.[1] Comments received from the guest speakers indicate that Gospel Kinship was realized. An elderly gentleman sentenced to 32 years for armed robbery when he was 19 years old told me after the teach-in how much hope the event had provided him and how he planned to share that hope with friends at Angola he would be visiting that weekend. Another speaker wrote that her group was "awesome," asked a lot of questions, and that she was grateful for the chance to tell her story. Bobby found it a "big relief" that people were open to hearing him and he knew they cared about his story because everyone in his group was "very attentive and inquisitive." For him, sharing what happened to people who cared somehow made his suffering worthwhile.

The Ignatian Teach-In on Mass Incarceration, which was co-sponsored by Loyola University Community Action Program, Office of Diversity and Inclusion, Department of Criminology and Justice, and University Honors, began with a prayer asking every participant to reflect on how their fears and indifference may have contributed to the scandal of hyper-incarceration. Unfortunately, the fear and indifference of some Louisiana legislators is [preventing criminal justice reform from advancing](#) in the current legislative session.[2]

Sign on to JSRI's [Action Alert](#) network to receive updates when important criminal justice bills are up for votes on the House or Senate floor and help us realize another goal of the Ignatian Teach-In on Mass Incarceration: "to respond to our local, state, and national mass incarceration crisis."

[1] Boyle, G. (2017). *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship*. New York, Simon & Schuster, p. 10.

[2] On April 3 the House voted 61-30 to approve [HB 195](#), which would roll back a key component of last year's criminal justice overhaul by lengthening probation from three years to five years. On April 17 the Senate passed a compromise bill, SB 389 that would limit probation to three years but gives judges the ability to extend it to five years if defendant fails to complete the terms of probation. Other technical issues favored by prosecutors are included in [SB 389](#), [SB 248](#), which would postpone implementation of "Raise the Age" legislation to stop treating 17 year-old offenders as adults, passed in the Senate and will be heard in the House soon. After two hours of testimony and debate, including a statement read by JSRI Fellow Dr. Nicholas Mitchell, a bill to eliminate the death penalty, [HB 162](#), failed to pass out of committee. But hope persists. Proposed legislation to require unanimous juries to convict ([SB 243](#)), restore voting rights to people with felony convictions ([HB 265](#)), and end mandatory sentences for children ([SB 102](#)) live on.