

Is It Time for Restorative Justice?

The number of incarcerated people is at an all-time high in our counties, our state and our nation. Prison budgets need to be cut, but no long-term solutions appeal to us. Victims' interests are often left out of the "justice" system.

Since the year 2000, the U.S. bishops have asked us to think in terms of "restorative justice." Restorative justice sees the so-called "criminal justice" system the way Jesus would see it – as a moral issue rather than a statutory issue. I like to nickname it the "victim justice" system.

Restorative justice sees the need to hold people morally accountable for their choices and actions. It seeks to promote, to the furthest extent possible, the healing of victim, offender, their families who are usually severely affected, and the communities affected.

Victims of crimes should always be given the option of involvement in the resolution of their cases. Most crime victims will tell you that our present system often discourages victim involvement in the "prosecution" of the case.

By emphasizing the violation of statutes and the imposition of unrelated punishments, we unintentionally encourage denial of responsibility. The design of our judicial process can allow a violator to be fully "prosecuted" but never realize the full human consequences or impact of the violation. The real needs of the victim and the violation of human relationships are usually ignored and the real moral issue is hidden.

Our present model of retributive justice focuses almost entirely on the state against the perpetrator. Restorative justice focuses first on the victim and the community harmed by the crime. This affirms the hurt and fear of the community, and insists that offenders come to grips with all of the real consequences of their choices and actions.

This is not a "soft on crime" approach. It specifically calls on the offender to face victims and the affected communities. This experience offers victims a much greater sense of peace and accountability. Offenders who are willing to face the human consequences of their actions are more ready to accept responsibility, make reparations, and rebuild their own lives.

Here are three of the possible ways one could become involved in restorative justice solutions:

1. Direct intervention and offering empathy and various kinds of support to victims and affected community members.
2. Direct intervention and offering of hope and compassion to offenders and their families; this includes detention ministry (prison ministry) and reentry assistance.
3. Victim-offender mediation, which can include family and community members. Victim-offender mediation uses the help of a skilled facilitator, and offers victims, or their families who opt for this, the opportunity to share the harm done to their lives and property, and provide a place for the offender to face the victim, learn the full extent of her or his actions, admit responsibility, acknowledge harm, and agree to real restitution.

We encourage pastors, lay people, detention ministry volunteers, religious, deacons, parish social ministry groups, seminarians, jail and prison chaplains, peace and justice contacts, youth and young adult group leaders, Parents of Murdered Children and other victims' groups to organize at the parish/local church level to respond to the need for healing justice. There has been no better time.

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