



Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development
Office of Domestic Social Development

**Restorative Justice: Healing and Transformation of Persons,
Families and Communities**

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“Experience tells us that enhancing and enforcing penalties often fails to resolve social problems, nor do they result in reducing the crime rate. Moreover this method can create serious problems for the community, such as overcrowded prisons and people held without [valid] convictions.... In many cases the offender fulfills his punishment objectively, serving his sentence but without changing inside or healing his wounded heart.”

--Pope Francis May, 30 2014

BACKGROUND

A Catholic approach to restorative justice recognizes that the dignity of the human person applies to both victim and offender. Justice must include more than punishment. Without healing and restoration, a limited approach can leave victims of crime with feelings of neglect, abandonment and anger making reconciliation and healing difficult, if not impossible. Punishment alone cannot address complex social problems in communities, or effectively help end cycles of crime and violence. A restorative justice approach is more comprehensive and addresses the needs of victims, the community and those responsible for causing harm through healing, prevention, education, rehabilitation and community support.

People must be held accountable for their actions but justice and restoration must be the object of punishment which must have a constructive and reformatory purpose. The great theologian, Saint Thomas Aquinas, wrote in the thirteenth century, "In this life, however, penalties are not sought for their own sake, because this is not the era of retribution; rather, they are meant to be corrective by being conducive either to the reform of the sinner or the good of society, which becomes more peaceful through the punishment of sinners" (*Summa Theologica*, II-II, Q. 68 A.1).

Rehabilitation and restoration must also include the spiritual dimension of healing and hope. Those who are impacted by crime or commit crime need the healing power that comes from being reconciled with their neighbor and community, as well as with God.

For restorative justice to be effective, it must also address the systemic and structural barriers to healing such as racial and economic disparity, cycles of crime and incarceration and the breakdown of the family. Those returning to the community following incarceration face significant barriers such as homelessness, unemployment, poverty, substance abuse, emotional and psychological stress, and social isolation. Without the proper support to help them succeed, recidivism is likely to place the person in an almost endless cycle that impacts the community and the life and dignity of the offender.

USCCB POSITION

Pope Francis has stated, “God is in everyone’s life. Even if the life of a person has been a disaster, even if it is destroyed by vices, drugs or anything else—God is in this person’s life.”

The U.S. Bishops have also been calling for restorative justice. In their 2000 pastoral statement, *Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice*, the Bishops stated, “Just as God never abandons us, so too we must be in covenant with one another. We

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are all sinners, and our response to sin and failure should not be abandonment and despair, but rather justice, contrition, reparation, and return or reintegration of all into the community.”

ACTION:

Healing and restoration are helped by public policies that assist those impacted by crime and also those who have made harmful choices. Housing, jobs with living wages, mental health and substance abuse counseling, as well as other programs, will help people reform their lives and keep communities safe.

During this Congress, remain engaged in the public debate on restorative and criminal justice reform, and urge your Senators and Representative to support policies that lift up human life and dignity, promote civility, community safety, and help reform people’s lives harmed by crime and violence.

There will be diverse legislation introduced during the 114th Congress which will enjoy bipartisan support. This will include:

- **Second Chance Reauthorization Act:** Authorizes funding for state and federal programs that help people leaving prison reintegrate back into their communities so that they do not reoffend. Programs focusing on education, literacy, job-placement, substance abuse treatment and other goals, help people be productive members of society.
- **Recidivism, Reduction and Public Safety Act:** Would reduce prison sentences for those who have not committed violent crimes and choose to participate in recidivism reduction programs such as: substance abuse recovery programs, mental health counseling, and vocational training and education programs. The legislation allows for faith-based organizations to participate in carrying out these programs which would help people those returning to the community from committing crimes in the future.

RESOURCES

- Pope Francis, “Address to the Delegates of the International Association of Penal Law,” October 23, 2014. https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/october/documents/papa-francesco_20141023_associazione-internazionale-diritto-penale.html
- *Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice* at USCCB Website: <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/criminal-justice-restorative-justice/crime-and-criminal-justice.cfm>
- USCCB Web Page on Criminal and Restorative Justice Issues: <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/criminal-justice-restorative-justice/index.cfm>
- *Restore Justice Resources* from *Catholic Mobilizing Network* <http://catholicmobilizing.org/programs/restorative-justice/>

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