



Respect: The Key to Healing Both Crime Victims and Prisoners

BY: MADELEINE J. CARON

The Order of Malta's 2011 National Symposium on Prison Ministry was held Saturday, April 2, 2011 at the Newark Renaissance Hotel in Newark, New Jersey. The program ran from 9:30AM to 2:00PM with an assortment of speakers, including those who are victims of crime and former prisoners who have productively re-entered civil society as changed human beings. The underlying theme of the conference was that treating people with dignity and respect is of fundamental importance to healing both criminals and their victims.

Fr. George Williams SJ, Chaplain at San Quentin State Prison in California, kicked off the conference speaking about the dehumanization of criminals when they enter the prison system. The job of prison ministry personnel is to remind them that they're human beings, with the opportunity to change and make better choices. Prisoners have the capacity to love, to be loved, and to be forgiven. Redemption is possible even if they remain in prison. There remains a purpose for their lives, even if most of their years are spent behind bars -- and even if they will never become released. The spirituality of prison ministry is enhanced by the Knights, Dames, Auxiliary Corps and our friends, who engage in prison ministry with the same sense of respect that our Founder Blessed Gerard showed to those at the Hospital in Jerusalem. Coming together in forums like this symposium to learn from each other to do a better job is increasingly important. Catholic lay people need to be better trained to minister to the people in prison. The declining number of men and women becoming clergy and religious only increases the Church's reliance upon lay people to become more involved. Fr. Williams expressed a desire to over time increase his involvement in providing this training to lay men and women so they are better prepared to effectively deliver high quality services. We need to remind everybody in the church -- including our teachers, the bishops -- that Matthew 25 tells us to: Clothe the naked, feed the hungry, care for the sick, and visit those in prison. The passage is not a multiple choice, but rather includes all of the works listed by Jesus. Fr. George emphasized that we, the Church, must be active in serving prisoners. As the percentage of our population engaged in the criminal justice system continues to grow, ignoring prisoners and pretending that they're not there only serves to weaken our society. Happily, Catholics like those represented here at the Symposium represent a bright spot and great promise to act upon the mandate of Jesus to our Church.

John Sage, from Texas, experienced a tragedy which inspired him to help criminals to understand how crime victims' families are feeling. What motivated him was the senseless

murder of his sister who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Her murder caused years of heartache and had a huge impact on her friends and family. The killers were a man and a woman. The man died in prison of AIDS and the woman still remains on death row in Texas. John's life was so impacted by this loss that he had to figure out a way to productively deal with it. He wanted to tell the criminals what this meant to him and how it affected his life. To do so, he set up a program known as "Bridges to Life" where volunteers impacted by crime go into prisons and talk to criminals about how the crimes they've committed have affected people. It makes prisoners painfully aware of how their actions affect the families of their victims. The prisoners meet in groups of about twelve together with a team of volunteers, which is usually half male and half female. A gender mix of volunteers is important as men and women have a practical ability to relate in different ways. A confidential discussion takes place, where the volunteers tell their personal stories and how crime has had an impact on their own lives. This tends to open the prisoners eyes to the impact of their actions. The strict requirement of confidentiality is critical as well, as without agreeing to those ground rules, prisoners will not genuinely "open up." These programs are 14 weeks long. Studies have shown that as the program progresses over the 14 weeks, prisoners become less skeptical, grow to have a higher awareness of the impact of their actions and heighten in their sense of remorse. The Bridges To Life program has been successful in dramatically reducing the recidivism rate for those who participate from an average of 40% to 20% in the State of Texas.

The next speaker, Richard Pompelio, Esq., is the Executive Director of the New Jersey Crime Victims Law Center. He spoke about how he went to law school at the University of Kentucky. After getting straight out of school, he, like many young lawyers, built a practice on defending the rights of individuals accused of crimes. He grew a good-sized law firm and enjoyed the financial success that came with that to the point where he and his wife were pinching themselves while enjoying a vacation in NYC because everything seemed just too great. His wife was concerned that something bad was going to happen to them because their lot in life all seemed too good to be true. Richard tried to comfort her, but he appreciated her sentiment. Shortly after that conversation, they learned that their 17 year old son who had been staying at a friend's house had been murdered. Defending a young woman who was being attacked during a party that had been "crashed by outsiders," he was stabbed to death by the attacker. That event completely changed the couple's life. During the trial of his son's murder, Richard began to see the legal system from a completely different view -- that of the crime victim's family. He realized that the court room had become dominated by the business of the prosecutor and the judge, with the defendant being the main participant and the victim's family having no place and no respect in the process. For example, he would get calls from the press asking what he thought of an upcoming hearing. This angered Richard as he learned that the victim's family never received any notification about such aspects of a trial. It became clear that the legal system had forgotten that the purpose of the court was to settle a dispute between an accused criminal and a victim. So, he did three things. First, he shut down his law firm representing accused criminals. Second, Richard then opened up a law practice specifically dedicated to representing the families of crime victims. Lastly, he led a successful campaign to change the state constitution to require that crime victims and their families will be dealt with in a manner showing fairness, respect, and honesty. Richard's message was that the family of crime victims can never fully heal. Rather, it's an ongoing process that never ends. His law firm helps crime victim's families' advance in

their healing process. Providing simple respect and dignity to the victims of crime and their families is an important way to advance this healing process.

Sister Gloria Perez, the Executive Director of Eva's Village in Paterson, New Jersey, described her organization as human service agency offering a range of help to the needy. It started as a soup kitchen that fed a few dozen people hot dogs and beans. Over the years, it has grown to serving thousands of meals every week. As their success grew, they began to provide an emergency shelter. That, in turn, led them to provide transitional housing. The purpose of all of these services is to help needy people back onto their feet and stabilize them so that they can have a job and find their own place. Eva's was then asked to take on in-patient drug detoxification and out-patient recovery counseling, like Alcoholics Anonymous and similar groups. They now help people deal with a full range of addictions through counseling services. A key aspect of their work is providing transitional housing for men and women who have left prison and are trying to re-enter the community. However, in order to live there, residents must adhere to a strict set of rules. A man named Charles joined Sr. Gloria at the podium. Charles spoke about his hard upbringing which got him involved in drugs and crime at an early age. He credited the relationship and support offered at Eva's House and its strict rules that helped him to become a productive member of society. He said that, with the right tools, recovery can and does happen. The presentation offered two themes to remember. First, forgiveness creates the ability to relieve pain and allows people to move on. Second, showing respect allows former prisoners to reclaim their humanity.

Rev. Walter Everett, a Methodist minister, spoke about how his son had been shot and killed by a man named Mike. Mike lead a drug infested youth and was parented by the characters that he met on the streets. One day Mike's apartment was robbed and Mike had gotten a tip that the person who had committed the crime was downstairs. In a flush of anger, Mike ran out and killed a young man he caught on the steps, which happened to be Rev. Everett's son, Scott. Scott had nothing to do with the robbery. At the trial, Mike apologized for his actions. Rev. Everett believed that the apology sounded genuine. After thinking about it for some weeks, Rev. Everett followed up with a letter offering Mike his forgiveness. After a while, Mike responded by writing back. They corresponded for a period of time, after which Mike invited Rev. Everett to visit him in prison. After an emotional first visit, Rev. Everett began to visit Mike on a regular basis. Ultimately, Rev. Everett went before the parole board and requested that Mike be paroled. The parole board was very skeptical of Mike's progress and Rev. Everett's position. But ultimately, the Parole Board granted a parole to Mike. The presentation was very unique in that Rev. Everett then yielded the podium to his son Scott's murderer, Mike. The two have lectured on their life experience and their relationship for several years. After his release, Mike kept his body clean by relying upon an ongoing participation in the Narcotics Anonymous programming, which was also part of his parole requirements. Narcotics Anonymous has been a helpful, and necessary, community for him. Mike now works with the organization, giving lots of speeches around the country. To reestablish himself from an employment perspective, Mike started off working for a shipping company at the lowest spot on the totem pole -- as an unskilled shipping dock hand. Through focus and effort, he has risen up to become the supervisor of the company's shipping facility with a total of 115 employees reporting to him. When Mike introduces himself, he introduces himself as an addict. Upon departure, he reminds his listeners that he's an addict. Once an addict, you're always an addict. Keeping that idea in front of him helps Mike to stay

away from drugs. One thing that he doesn't shy away from is crediting the forgiveness shown by Rev. Everett as the key to reclaiming his life.

During the Roundtable portion of the program led by John Santa KM, Jim Rundell AUX from Wichita, Kansas reported that he is determined to serve the toughest group to deal with in the prison system -- prisoners who are spending time in what is known as "the hole." These people are locked up 23 hours everyday. They get one hour per day to stretch in their own 8 foot-by-12 foot area made of fencing, which is much like a dog cage. Jim said that these people have virtually no human interaction other than with the guards who feed them three times daily. Jim has created a program in the form of a series of exercises in booklets that helps these men and women find God in their lives. The program's goal is to help them change their heart and to one day, hopefully, become productive members of society. Jim offered to share this program with all involved in the Order of Malta's Prison Ministry Program, with many participants expressing thanks to him and interest in spreading his program throughout the United States.

The need for forgiveness, respect and love found its way into the remarks of all of today's speakers. These gifts appear to provide relief for the burdens of all those who suffer, no matter the label applied to them, such as convict or crime victim. As the Symposium participants had been reminded by Fr. Williams, the founder of the Order of Malta built his hospital exactly upon these pillars of charity. The Knights, Dames, Auxiliary Corps and their friends left the Symposium thankful for the words of the speakers, and even more deeply committed to doing the work that Jesus has commanded of His followers.

Madeleine J. Caron of Andover, MA, is the daughter of Steve Caron KM and Evelyn Caron AUX. Now finishing her junior year at Lawrence Academy at Groton, Maddy serves as a staff member of the SMOM American Association's "The Serving Brother" prison ministry newsletter for the incarcerated and participated in the SMOM's 2011 National Symposium on Prison Ministry.