

SAINTS ALIVE! JUNE 23 ST. JOSEPH CAFASSO, PATRON SAINT OF PRISONERS



“Be mindful of prisoners as if sharing their imprisonment, and of the ill-treated as of yourselves, for you also are in the body” Hebrews 13:3.

Joseph Cafasso was born to a peasant family in the region of Piedmont in 1811. He entered the archdiocesan seminary in Turin. He was one of the ‘Social Saints’ of Turin, who took it as their responsibility to minister to the dispossessed, marginalized and often criminal elements of a city in the throes of industrialization.

Cafasso was known for his extensive ministry in the local prisons and served as the comforter of those condemned to the death penalty, coming to be called “The Priest of the Gallows.”

To him, God is about restoring the broken. The result of our current criminal justice system is that the broken remain broken. How can we move society away from retributive justice and toward restorative justice?

The United States has 4% of the population of the world, and the United States has 25% of the population of the world’s prisons. The overall incarceration rate has increased 500% during the past thirty years. The population of Oregon state prisons, which hold all offenders sentenced to more than a year, increased by 85% from 1995 to 2005. **Oregon’s spending on its prison system quadrupled during the past 30 years.**

Why is that? Some facts raise questions about whether our criminal justice system is truly just.

- **One in every three African-American males will go to prison** at some point in their lives; one in every six Latino men; one in every eight African-American women.
- **Incarceration has become a for-profit business** as the number of private prisons grows. Private prison companies like Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) and GEO Group, who contract with state and federal governments, set quotas with these governments ensuring that a certain number of prison beds are filled. Under its current contract, **GEO is guaranteed a minimum of 750 full beds at the Northwest Detention Center in Tacoma, Washington** each night — beyond that they’re paid based on how many beds are filled.

To maintain a level of profitability that pleases investors requires dramatically increasing the population of those imprisoned. Incarceration rates continue to rise.

- **Mandatory minimum sentences and three-strikes laws** leave sentencing out of a judge’s discretion. The U.S. Catholic Bishops support reforms to mandatory minimum sentences by expanding current judicial sentencing options related to nonviolent drug offenses.

Restorative Justice seeks to repair the damage, reintegrate all who were harmed and alienated, and (re)establish human dignity. This is prison ministry. The U.S. Catholic Bishops support 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.

St. Joseph Cafasso is the patron saint of prisoners. Let us ask for him to intercede with God and pray for all our prisoners. And let us work toward a criminal justice system that is just and allows God to restore the broken to him.



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