



# Matthew 25

...whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine,  
you did for me.

The Social Ministry Commission Newsletter  
of St. Mary's Catholic Center, College Station, Texas

February 2010

## Restorative Justice

*"For I was ..... in prison and you visited me" (Matthew 25:36)*

In 2000 in their statement "Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice" the US Catholic Bishops offered their reflections on issues and actions regarding crime and criminal justice to stimulate a renewed dialogue among Catholics and other people of good will. They remarked that "putting more people in prison and, sadly, more people to death has not given Americans the security we seek.....The common good is undermined by criminal behavior that threatens the lives and dignity of others and by policies that seem to give up on those who have broken the law (offering too little treatment and too few alternatives to either years in prison or the execution of those who have been convicted of terrible crimes)".....

The US Bishops recommended that new approaches should be built, in particular supporting models of restorative justice that seek to address crime in terms of the harm done to victims and communities, not simply as a violation of law. They encouraged Catholics who minister to prisoners and victims to work toward a justice system that is less retributive and more restorative.

### Teaching Basic Life Skills

by Monique Reed, St. Mary's Prison Ministry member

I've been doing prison ministry since 1987. During that time I have come to see first-hand that what the social scientists and statistics say is true--many inmates lack the basic life skills that might have kept them out of jail or which might help keep them from landing back in jail once they're released. The local prison ministry volunteers have long wanted to do something about this, but the scarcity of volunteers and lack of a coherent vision held us back for a long time.

Last year, Restorative Justice Ministries of the Brazos Valley (RJMBV), the non-denominational umbrella group that coordinates prison ministry in Bryan-College Station, was finally able to put together a set of classes designed to teach basic Life Skills in several key areas. So far, we have developed programs in Communication/Anger Management, Parenting, Health, Job-Readiness, and Personal Finance. The instructors are RJMBV volunteers who have expertise in the various areas, either as a result of their occupation or life experiences. Some have experience with leading church services, Bible studies, or catwalk prison ministry (going from cell to cell), while others have become involved in prison ministry specifically to teach Life Skills.

Each course consists of six lessons and meets for an hour each week in one of the jail multipurpose rooms. The lessons consist of talks, worksheets, role-playing, and discussions. For example, I teach Personal Finance, and we study basic money skills, budgeting, saving money on food, banking, managing debt and credit, and what God says about money. Each inmate

has a folder to keep any handouts together. At the end of the six weeks, students who have completed five or six of the lessons are given a certificate. The certificates are more than just pieces of paper--inmates can use them to demonstrate to judges, parole and probation boards, and case workers that they are trying to make a positive change.

That is our greatest hope with this program, not that the students will remember everything we teach, but that they will come to believe that their lives can change. We hope to lead them to see that the choices they make, even about little things, do matter. We want them to want something better for themselves.

It's a ministry that demands energy and commitment from the instructors and returns great rewards in friendship and the joy of knowing that we're doing what Jesus called us to do.

*"Punishment does not serve merely the purpose of defending the public order and guaranteeing the safety of persons..... There is a twofold purpose here. On the one hand, encouraging the re-insertion of the condemned person into society; on the other, fostering a justice that reconciles, a justice capable of restoring harmony in social relationships disrupted by the criminal act committed. (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, #403, 2005)*

**Bridges To Life** by Clotilde Pichon, Director of Social Ministries at St. Mary's

Bridges To Life is a faith-based Restorative Justice program dedicated to making our communities safer by bringing healing to victims of crime and reducing recidivism (return to prison) among offender graduates of the program. During the 14-week process the victim volunteers and offenders are brought together along with a facilitator in a small group format which includes prayers, questions, self-disclosed stories and letters written by inmates to their victims.

Since 2000 more than 9,200 offenders have graduated from the program and the results of a recidivism study still in progress show positive outcomes: of the 3,480 offender graduates followed through the study, only 16% (567) have returned to prison compared to a nationwide rate of 40-50%, and only 1% (38) have returned for a violent crime!

At the annual benefit Bridges To Life luncheon in December, I had the chance to get a more personal grasp of the impacts of the program through the words of some volunteers and graduates. Ashley was a corporate executive badly injured during a car robbery; she underwent several surgeries, but never completely recovered physically from her injuries and fell to bad depression; then she heard about Bridges To Life and since then has become one of their best volunteers:

"Telling one's story is a vital part of the healing process. It has also allowed me to watch myself grow emotionally and spiritually." On the other side, Chris is married with two children; he wanted more money so he got into the business of transporting drugs and eventually got caught, and sentenced to 10-year jail. During his time there he went back to his faith and felt a strong desire to change; after graduating from the Bridge To Life program, he successfully started his own small business. Chris acknowledged that the program really helped him to understand the side of the victims: "I got to see crime through both eyes and I don't wanna ever see that hurt again." As for Daniel, he was only 8-years old when he got involved with a bad group of kids, starting with minor criminal offenses and gradually getting to worse offenses; while still a minor he was sentenced to life in prison for stabbing a woman to death during a house robbery. Daniel, now a middle-age man, was recently released. He told the audience how he matured in prison and how the program helped him: "I learned to be responsible as an individual. I received so much through the program, mostly the faith to get out and make something good out of the bad."

The ministry needs more volunteers. Training is provided and commitment is for 14-week cycles. It only requires a willing heart and being a good listener, and *you can make a difference in the lives of others.*

**Facts** from National Institute of Correction ([www.nicic.org/](http://www.nicic.org/)) and [www.sentencingproject.org](http://www.sentencingproject.org)

In 2004, 2.1 million Americans were incarcerated and Texas has the highest rate of incarceration in the US.

As of 2007, 1 of every 131 Americans was incarcerated in prison or jail.

Black males have a 32% chance of serving time in prison at some point in their lives, while Hispanic males have a 17% chance and white males have a 6% chance.

93% of prison inmates are male, 7% female.

40% of persons in prison or jail in 2006 were black and 20% were Hispanic.

62% of jail inmates in 2006 were unconvicted and awaiting trial.

82% of those sentenced to state prisons in 2004 were convicted of non-violent crimes.

**What Can You Do**

**Pray** for prisoners, their families, and crime victims.

**Act** by volunteering to prison ministries: contact Deacon Reed ([dreed@aggiecatholic.org](mailto:dreed@aggiecatholic.org)) to join the Catholic services offered by St. Mary's to local jail; contact Monique Reed (979-665-8657) if you are interested about the Life Skills Class offered by Restorative Justice Ministries of the Brazos Valley; contact Frank Manning at [Extremetedium@aol.com](mailto:Extremetedium@aol.com) if you want more info about Bridge to Life or visit their website ([www.bridgestolife.org](http://www.bridgestolife.org))

**Reflect** on social causes, criminal justice policies and principles of our faith by visiting the following websites: [www.usccb.org/sdwp/projects/socialteaching/excerpt.htm](http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/projects/socialteaching/excerpt.htm), [www.nccbuscc.org/sdwp/criminal.htm](http://www.nccbuscc.org/sdwp/criminal.htm), [www.restorativejustice.org](http://www.restorativejustice.org), [www.sentencingproject.org](http://www.sentencingproject.org). [www.ccedp.org](http://www.ccedp.org) (Catholic Campaign to End the use of the Death Penalty).

**Transform** social structures by joining a legislative network. ([www.tx catholic.org](http://www.tx catholic.org), [www.catholiccharitiesusa.org/advocacy](http://www.catholiccharitiesusa.org/advocacy))

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**Looking for something special to do during Lent?**

You are invited to join the Social Ministry Commission during Lent for a 4-week group study to learn about Catholic Social Teaching and how it applies to your own life. We will study the last encyclical of Pope Benedict XVI "Caritas in Veritate" released in June 2009.

On Wed., 7:00-8:30 PM in Room 204; Feb 24: "Charity, Justice, and the Common Good"; March 3: "Human Rights & Duties"; March 10: "Morality in Economic Life"; March 24: "The Unity of the Human Family and Global Solidarity".

You can attend the whole series or only one, as each session is independent. For more info and to sign up, contact Clotilde at [cpichon@aggiecatholic.org](mailto:cpichon@aggiecatholic.org)

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