

Restoring dignity

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I have worked as a chaplain in Western Australia for the past 14 years. Much of my time is spent listening to inmates - hearing confessions - most of them non-sacramental. These inmates are Aboriginal, non-aboriginal, African, Middle Eastern, Christians, Muslims, agnostics and atheists. They want to get things off their chest, burdens of guilt. They seek forgiveness. They hate what they have done. They hate themselves.

I try to help them realise that whatever crimes they have committed, this is not who they are. They may be a murderer, drug dealer or thief, but their true identity is a son or daughter of God. Nothing can alter this. There is in all of them a part that has always said 'yes' to God. It's that which prompts them to seek forgiveness, to be reconciled with those they have hurt, to make their confession to someone they trust.

It takes time to build this trust. They need to know that what they tell me is confidential and that I will not sit in judgement on them or betray their trust. I walk with inmates on their journey to God listening to them. I am moved by the honesty with which they bare their soul to me, a complete stranger.

As I listen I discover that this man who has traumatised others through his crimes, also carries deep wounds inflicted in childhood. I find it's not enough to simply deal with what they have done in the recent past.

They often want to talk of what they underwent as a child.

So many inmates who have committed violent crimes experienced great humiliations and traumas in childhood. Born into a family of alcohol, drug abuse and violence, they never felt safe. Often the inmates' parents had a similarly brutal childhood.

There are other factors too. Our prisons are full of people who grow up in poverty, in families which are in some way marginalised - sometimes because of skin colour or due to mental illness. From an early age they learn to see themselves as outsiders. Few felt loved by their fathers who believed they wouldn't amount to much. Most are poorly educated and unskilled.

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When they tell me about what they went through as a child they are not trying to find excuses for their criminal behaviour. They want to be reconciled with those who abused them. They want to break free of self-destructing addictions and stop taking out their resentment on others, their own loved ones and the victims of their crimes.

I ask myself, "If I had to leave home in my early teens to escape physical or sexual abuse,

would I not have ended up in jail? Would I not also have become "street-wise" and looked for companionship of mates equally lost and sought momentary escape in drugs? Would I, too, have ended up on the treadmill of drugs, crime and jail?"

It's a fact that as time goes on people get used to crime and jail and have little awareness of the suffering and trauma they caused their victims. Most inmates can recover an empathy for others especially when they encounter people who will help them recover a sense of their own worth and find healing for the wounds of their past.

The criminal justice system has shown little concern for the victims of crime. The voices of those who have been assaulted, had their homes burgled, and that of their families haven't been heard. But things are beginning to change.

There are programmes run in prisons designed to help inmates face up to the suffering they have inflicted on others; to take responsibility for their actions and gain insight into what victims endure.

One such programme (run by prison fellowship) is called "The Sycamore Tree." The name derives from the story of Zaccheus. He was the tax collector/crook who sought Jesus' forgiveness and promised

Fr Toohey tells us about his prison ministry in Western Australia.

to make it up to all of whom he had taken advantage. The programme involved six people who were victims of crime meeting up in prison with six inmates who had committed similar crimes. Over six two-hour sessions they shared their experiences with each other.

The Bible stories of Zaccheus were stepping stones leading into an understanding of the journey of healing. It begins with a person admitting to the evil they have done, confessing their guilt, hearing the truth of what the victims have suffered, being forgiven and reconciled and making up in so far as possible for the harm they have done. Participants paired off and shared experiences.

The victims said that it helped to bring them closure - even though these inmates were not the actual perpetrators of the crime. Particularly moving was a memorial ceremony where each of us lit a candle and named someone we wanted to pray for. Tears were shed and losses grieved over.

Inmate participants told me that this was the hardest course they had ever done - but also the best! They had never realised the impact of their crimes on victims, their family and community. "The Sycamore Tree" was a big step in the direction of restoring dignity and hope. Out of it came healing and the sense of being affirmed.

One thing I have come to realise over my years of prison ministry: our current system of criminal justice via courts and prisons doesn't deliver justice. Every crime committed profoundly affects not just those immediately involved but also the wider community. Simply locking up the perpetrators does nothing of itself to heal the broken relationships and shattered lives. It tends to deepen mistrust between inmates, their spouses and children. For many, prisons are schools of crime.

Yet there are many people working in prisons and in the community who are endeavouring to humanise the system, to stop using prisons as a place of hiding away the homeless and the mentally ill, to help prisoners face up to drug and alcohol addictions, to learn basic literacy skills and further their education, to learn skills that will provide them employment and come to a sense of their God-given self-worth.

I thank God that, as a Columban missionary, I can play some part in this. My experience in South Korea and Chile has sensitised me to the suffering of the poor. It's a great gift to be able to meet Jesus in those in jail. It's through them that I am growing in awareness that I am "beloved Son of the Father."



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