

CONFINEMENT AND CONVERSION—SELECTED SESSION

Topic: Confinement and Conversion
Convener: Andrew Skotnicki, Manhattan College
Moderator: Tobias Winright, St. Louis University
Presenters: Andrew Skotnicki, Manhattan College
Kathryn Getek Soltis, Villanova University
William O'Neill, S.J., Graduate Theological Union, Santa Clara University

This session applied this year's theme of conversion to those suffering the pains of imprisonment. Given the nature of the prison experience and its ancient connections to monasticism, it has always proven to be a fertile environment for the development or rediscovery of religious sentiment and, more specifically, for powerful transformational experiences. Each of the presenters approached this theme from different perspectives. The first paper looked at conversion as a way to reconceive the elusive concept of rehabilitation. The second developed the need to convert our punitive culture, and the third explored the relation between conversion experiences in a specific facility and the practice of restorative justice.

Skotnicki's paper was entitled, "Prayer, Conversion, and Rehabilitation." He began by noting that both rehabilitation and conversion are deeply ambiguous concepts in the penal context. This lack of clarity stems from the fact that the terms have mainly been interpreted as synonyms for adjustment to institutional rules and obedience to law. He then argued that the true meaning of each is only revealed in the context of contemplative prayer. Specifically, he employed a variety of methodological avenues including data from psychology, neuroscience, and autobiographical accounts to underscore the contention often expressed in mystical literature that conversion, and *a fortiori* rehabilitation, signal a shift from a divided to a unified consciousness based upon the experience of unconditional love and, ultimately, its bestowal upon others and upon creation.

Katherine Getek Soltis presented a paper entitled, "Conversion and the Society that Imprisons." She used contemporary sociological accounts, particularly Michelle Alexander's well-received volume, *The New Jim Crow*, to underscore the shocking racial and class disparities in the profile of those who are imprisoned and the insidious problems of stigmatization and social barriers that result. She then employed a conversion framework using the work of James Alison to illuminate how we must move as a society toward a proper regard for the incarcerated. She argues that for those in our prisons and for those returning to society after release, justice requires radical shifts both in perceptions and social relations. In this way, justice requires the conversion of correctional staff, policymakers, and citizens alike.

Finally, William O'Neill presented his paper, "'First be Reconciled (Mt 5:24)': Conversion and Restorative Justice." He began by reminding the audience of the fact that incarceration in the United States is largely governed by the imperatives of retributive justice. In such an adversarial framework, little or no concern is expressed for rehabilitation, much less conversion. He then gave moving testimonies of the powerful conversion experiences undergone by the women to whom he ministers in a federal prison outside of Oakland, California. He echoed the idea that prison has

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been and continues to be a place (*locus*) of conversion, a hoping against hope. His presentation brought together the faith experience of the women themselves, the implications of how this experience would be interpreted in a framework of restorative justice, and the need of such a restorative turn in both Church and society

The session was admirably moderated by Tobias Winright who not only moved the proceedings along effectively and punctually but also added greatly to the fruitful and energetic discussion that followed with his own prior experience in law enforcement.

The question and answer period exhausted the last 35 minutes of the allotted time and kept many of the participants talking about the ideas presented after the session ended. It was suggested by many of the participants that the topic of Criminal Justice and the rich historical, moral, and theological issues it raises should be an ongoing field of interest for the CTSA.

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