



Resolutions To Action

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Resisting Mass Incarceration; Resisting Racism

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EXPERIENCE

We know we live in a racist society. We know we live in a punishing society where two million men and women are incarcerated and seven million are under criminal justice supervision. But white middle class residents of these United States have to go out of our way to witness racism and mass incarceration. Indeed, a survey this fall by National Public Radio says 55 percent of white Americans believe white Americans face discrimination. They are wrong.

Mass incarceration is a racist public policy. At every level of the criminal justice system: deployment of police, traffic and pedestrian stops, juvenile programs, fines for infractions, warrants, plea agreements, length of sentences, death penalty; the race of the defendant correlates directly with the harshness of treatment.

As Catholic sisters, we are called to the margins of our society and we stand there as witnesses to injustice. But we don't tell our own stories near-

ly often enough. I live with a sister whose black art student won a Mobile, Alabama contest in 1965 and when the judges saw the winner was black they tried to revoke the prize, but Sister Roberta refused to allow it. She publicized the award, thanked the judges loudly, and praised her student. But Roberta is modest; life is busy; women don't toot our own horns. So I only heard the story last year when she showed me a photo of the art piece in a fit of house cleaning.

So first, in this consideration of how to resist mass incarceration and racism, reflect on your own life. What have you done? How did you learn about racism? What steps, however halting, have you taken to resist the system?

Go deeper. As a white woman (and most of us sisters are white) how have you explored your own feelings? We all see the color of our skins, and we've been taught to have emotional responses to skin color. When did you begin to ques-

tion what you've learned? What has been your path toward resistance of the evil of racism?

Write a Facebook paragraph. Publish photos of your work. Tell your story, your failings as well as your good deeds. Ask your sisters to tell their stories around the dinner table. Ask your archivist for help. Resisting racism is the moral call of our time. What are we doing? Let's record it.

The very act of recording our accomplishments will highlight our failings and help us learn how to do better. We need to shed light on our lives.

Resolutions to Action is an occasional publication of the Global Concerns Committee of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR). Members of the committee are: Danielle Bonetti, CSJ; Gemma Doll, OP; Susan Francois, CSJP; Alice Gerdeman, CDP; Donna Marie Gribshaw, SCL; Eileen Haynes, SCL; and Ann Scholz, SSND, staff. Please address correspondence to:

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SOCIAL ANALYSIS

Most of you, gentle readers, have visited a jail or a prison. You have written to a prisoner. You have accompanied a student or a client to a courtroom. You have served on a jury. You have had some contact with the criminal justice system and you know it's not a just system. There is no point in my wasting precious space listing its ills.

But the first ill is that it is a racist policy. And racist policies are formed and buttressed by personal racism. So we are resisting on multiple fronts: always challenging our own inner ease with the prevailing culture; always analyzing law and public policy to demand better; always striving to overcome our own inertia and take what actions we are able.

REFLECTION

Professor Amy Levad has written a book: *Redeeming a Prison Society: A Liturgical and Sacramental Response to Mass Incarceration*. She reminds us there that the name of the sacrament is penance and reconciliation, not just reconciliation. The more we examine our own good deeds and failings, the greater our responsibility to do penance and make amends. We are the ones receiving the call to repent. We are the ones in need of redemption.

It's easy to jump to the need for men and women in prison to seek out op-

portunities for restorative justice. They have their own sins, possibly different than their crimes. In a rare moment we might be invited to listen to their sorrow, their repentance. But do we repent to them? Do we tell them we are sorry this happened to them? Not likely.

We sisters are getting old. It is difficult to drive to the state capitol – or even to the local office of a state legislator – to urge them to revamp the system. But we can write letters. We can email. We can put that politician's phone number on our speed dial. These actions are a penance, but they are also a joy. They are our invitation to our white brothers and sisters to join us in rejecting hateful feelings and hateful behavior and instead to do good.

We are invited to the Eucharist because we are sinners. Our parish communities and our families as well as our convents provide the place for us to share our deepest sorrows and our deepest desires. Amy Levad reminds us that the celebration of the Eucharist is a public service that shapes our moral lives and calls us to justice. Together we seek forgiveness for our sins and share a meal, seeking to be one body.

The meals we share at home and with our families are echoes of the Eucharist. The food we prepare is a blessing offered to those we love. Our task is always to grow the circle of those we love.

ACTION

Our work falls into three categories: education, ministry, and community organizing. And we need to do them all at the same time.

1. We must keep reading, listening to the news, going to movies about race and mass incarceration. I'm not a fan of the TV series, but the book *Orange is the New Black* by Piper Chapman tells amazing truths about prison. So does *Just Mercy* by Brian Stephenson about the death penalty. By all means read Amy Levad.
2. We must keep writing letters to prisoners. We must raise money so families can call their locked-up brothers and mothers. We must prepare meals for men and women in re-entry programs, just released from prison – and invite them to our churches and convents.
3. We must change the system. We must get on the de-incarcerate bandwagon. We must campaign for an end to bail, limits to prosecutorial discretion, shorter sentences, including for violent crimes. We know as teachers and social workers and healers that punishment is not the same as rehabilitation. We need to organize.

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