

## **On Catholic Mobilizing Network's Annual Conference on Restorative Justice**

Reflection by DP/RJ Team Member David O'Brien

*"If your brother sins [against you], go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won over your brother." - Matthew 18:15*

From September 25-27, Catholic Mobilizing Network held its annual Restorative Justice Conference in Atlanta, GA. The Conference began with a brief interview between a college student and a former Wisconsin Supreme Court Justice explaining simply what restorative justice is: the process of resolving harm by bringing together victims, offenders, and the community to promote accountability, healing, and the repair of relationships rather than relying solely on punishment. Following this, we made our way to opening mass. During Mass, the Archbishop of Atlanta, Bishop Hartmayer, prayed for both the conference and those incarcerated, making a point to pray for two men Geoffrey Todd West and Blaine Keith Milam set to be executed that evening.

The following day, there were multiple plenaries surrounding the dehumanization of those convicted. Multiple speakers provided alternatives from things as radical as prison abolition to things as simple as allowing prisons to provide the opportunities for the prisoner to apologize to the victim directly and personally. The final plenary brought in people from Georgia Justice Project and an Assistant District Attorney for DeKalb County to discuss the work they are doing surrounding restorative justice, including but not limited to: a pre-charging diversion, four prosecutorial diversion programs, and re-entry programs.

The final day had speakers discuss both their personal experiences in being victims of both crime and the criminal justice system and how they found forgiveness as well as having two law enforcement officers discuss their own policy programs they have established and/or utilized to help the mentally ill and indigent. The conference came to a close with each attendant having the opportunity to discuss the conference with one another.

Walking away from the conference, I found myself more hopeful towards the cause of helping those incarcerated. I met judges, lawyers, police officers, and advocates from Seattle, WA to Tallahassee FL, who were each heavily involved in their communities and continually gaining support for their missions. Statistics were discussed showing continuous decline in support for the death penalty. New initiatives surrounding non-traditional policing and rehabilitation as well as how to spread them were continuously discussed. As time goes by more people are bound to support more humane solutions for criminal justice. While obviously we still have a

long way to go, it was eye opening seeing just a small number of the many people and organizations working towards reform.

In attending the conference, I found many likeminded people attempting to come to terms with individual and systemic injustice throughout the country. Some recounted their own struggles with forgiving those who have harmed them while others discussed the importance of being forgiven in their journey to rehabilitation. Some made the point to discuss how important it is not only to forgive individuals who have harmed them but also the systems that led to said harm. Since, I have been often thinking about Christ's message to forgive the Romans for crucifying him as they did not truly know the severity of their actions. In the same way, myself and others need to learn to forgive those within the justice system who are blind to the suffering they cause as we work to remedy it.