

***Harm, Healing, and Human Dignity:
A Catholic Encounter with Restorative Justice***
A Reflection by Martha Hurley
November 2020



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Recently I read the book [*Harm, Healing, and Human Dignity: A Catholic Encounter with Restorative Justice*](#) (2019) adapted by Caitlin Morneau. It's a quick read but poignant. Some of you might have received a copy as part of the [*Harm, Healing, and Human Dignity conference*](#) sponsored by Catholic Mobilizing Network in late October. I wondered whether the book could generate deep reflection and transform thought at the individual level. I decided to set aside 30 minutes each night to read and reflect on the book's five chapters. I share with you now how this book helped me reframe, reset, and prepare for action around restorative justice and the death penalty.

At the time that I read *Harm, Healing and Human Dignity*, I had been struggling with four issues:

1. The racial tensions and riots that had become an all too common part of the American landscape;
2. The political uncertainty and harmful rhetoric prevalent across the country as we moved into election season;
3. The return to state-sanctioned violence via the death penalty at the federal level;
4. The seeming lack of value placed on human life across the spectrum evident with COVID – in jails, prisons, the streets, and homes.

The concept of harm seemed to dominate my ruminations in 2020.

Then I read Chapter One. It was short. It talked about restorative justice and faith and presented reflective questions for contemplation. The questions at end of the chapter were thoughtful, but it was the prayer I found that led to initial insight.

Lord, I am weary from the weight of brokenness and the division in our world, in the criminal justice system, and in my own life. In you I find hope for redemption and know that you will show me a better way, a more restorative way. Guide my path as I seek to be a messenger of mercy, justice, and human dignity for all people, most especially those impacted by crime and the criminal justice system. (p. 10)

This prayer didn't solve the issues that I was struggling with, but what it did was bring to light something that I had missed. I was weary from observing "the brokenness and divisions in our world, in the criminal justice system..." The return of federal executions weighed heavy on my heart. As I reflected on this prayer and its meaning, I decided to jot down on paper a list of beliefs that had compelled me to start this work years ago:

- The fundamental belief that human dignity should be a guiding force for our justice system;

- The belief that those most impacted by crime and the criminal justice system require our care and attention;
- The belief that even with everything happening in the world today, there is still hope for redemption;
- The belief that I have a role to play in working towards systemic change.

I gained valuable insight from reflecting deeply about restorative justice and these beliefs on that first night. I was reminded that I was not alone in my desire to see these harms healed, justice restored, and the system transformed. There was a faith-based community of others ready and willing to assist and uplift. The call for guidance reminded me that work of this type requires fortitude, steadfastness, prayer, and community during the best of times but even more so during times of political and social unrest.

As I continued to read subsequent chapters and reflect nightly on the material, I found that I did not just think about the issues but also my role in the restorative justice movement. Through reflection, I developed a greater understanding of three things

1. My role in the harms;
2. What I could do personally to help myself and others move past harm, hurt, and fear;
3. That I was on a spiritual as well as a practical journey.

Thus, at the end of my five-day reflective period, I found myself no longer weary but in receipt of a list of very concrete spiritual and community-oriented action steps to help me on the path towards becoming a better “agent of restoration.”

Since then, I have shared this book with others, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, involved in justice work. I shared the book with them for the same reason that I am sharing this reflection with you. The aim is to encourage you to embark on your own personal, reflective, restorative justice journey and to find renewal in spirit and mission during these troubling times. And while I pursued this exercise alone during the pandemic, I can only imagine the insight that a collective might achieve in conversation as part of a community.

Reference:

[Harm, Healing, and Human Dignity: A Catholic Encounter with Restorative Justice](#). Adapted by Caitlin Morneau. Liturgical Press Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2019, 66 pp., (paper) ISBN978-0-08146-6441-4; (eBook) ISBN 9780814664162, \$7.95.