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The best way to describe our prison system? 'It's nuts'

Bill Tammeus | Feb. 8, 2012 A small c catholic

Several weeks ago, I saw an exhibit of photos featured in the compelling new book *Grace Before Dying* [1], by Lori Waselchuk [2] and Lawrence N. Powell, and I wrote about it on my daily blog, "Faith Matters." [3]

The book is about the hospice care program at the Angola State Prison in Louisiana [4] -- a program in which prisoners help other prisoners who are dying.

Some days later, when I had a chance to meet Lori, we talked about lots of matters related to her moving photos in the book, but I was anxious to see if she had drawn any conclusions about the American prison system itself.

She certainly had, and as we talked about her assessment that the system is based not on justice but on convenience and expediency, I said, "Would you agree with me that our prison system violates major tenets of the great religions?"

"Yes," she said immediately. And then she paused to unpack what she meant.

America's prison system, she said, is formed out of political and economic systems that are fueled by fear. That is to say, "we fear losing wealth. We fear 'the other.' And our political system hasn't been able to respond well."

Prisons, but especially the Angola prison, generally amount to a "legalized plantation culture," she said. As Lori notes in her book, the 18,000 acres on which the Angola facility sits "consolidates the footprints of three former plantations."

The size of the prison population makes the broken nature of America's penal system all the more appalling. At the beginning of last year, 1.6 million Americans were in prison [5] -- and that represented a slight decline from the year before. Indeed, it was the first decline in almost four decades.

As *The New York Times* reported a few years ago [6], though the U.S. contains about 5 percent of the world's population, it has almost a quarter of the world's prisoners.

I'm not suggesting that all prison officials are unfeeling animals or that almost all of the folks behind bars are decent, misunderstood people who should be allowed to wander the streets unsupervised. I know better. I've visited prisons. A few months ago, I even was the speaker to a group of inmates nearing release from a federal prison.

But much of America's prison system and its treatment -- more accurately, its mistreatment -- of inmates is a rebuke to religions that teach the inestimable value of each human being.

Lori Waselchuk has concluded on the basis of years of work in prisons that the American society that has created this system and continues to tolerate it values wealth over community. What religion teaches that?

Indeed, Lori uses a rather technical academic term to describe America's penal system: "It's nuts."

And yet the astonishingly loving hospice care program that operates within the Angola prison demonstrates what humans are capable of achieving even in terrible circumstances.

Prison should, of course, be a place that not just punishes criminals but also does its best to rehabilitate them. In my experience, however, precious little rehabilitation happens, and when it does, it seems not to impress parole boards.

My friend Jon is a good example. He entered prison at age 19, convicted of robbery and rape. He's now in his early 50s, and I consider him the most rehabilitated prisoner in America, having earned bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees while behind bars.

But the parole board so far has refused to set him free.

I know it's not possible to draw broad conclusions from one example, but our prisons contain many people who either are ready to re-enter society or who could get to that point if only prisons weren't schools teaching convicts new crime techniques.

And what's the response of faith communities to this abomination? There's some engagement, but mostly there's a telling silence. I think Lori Waselchuk is right. Our prison system shames us. In her piercingly elegant words, it's nuts.

[Bill Tammeus, a Presbyterian elder and former award-winning Faith columnist for *The Kansas City Star*, writes the daily "Faith Matters" blog [7] for *The Star*'s website and a monthly column for *The Presbyterian Outlook*. His latest book, co-authored with Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn, is *They Were Just People: Stories of Rescue in Poland During the Holocaust [8]*. Email him at wtammeus@kc.rr.com.]

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