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Restorative Justice and Beyond: A Horizon of Mercy by Bishop Gary Gordon

Restorative Justice Week, November 15 - 22, 2015, invites us to consider how the practice of restorative justice can build a culture of hope for all those affected by crime, and how our Christian faith challenges all of us to journey toward the horizon of mercy.

A simple way to understand the model of restorative justice versus traditional criminal justice is described by Howard Zehr in *Changing Lenses*. Zehr outlines the questions that are asked when the life of an individual or community has suffered harm, compared to those asked in the criminal justice system.

Restorative justice asks:

- Who has been hurt?
- What are their needs?
- Whose obligations are these?
- What are the causes?
- Who has a stake in the situation?
- What is the appropriate process to involve stakeholders in an effort to address causes and put things right?

This contrasts with criminal justice, the most common practice in our society today, which seeks to answer only three questions:

- What laws have been broken?
- Who did it?
- What do the offender(s) deserve?

Restorative justice builds a culture of hope because its fundamental starting point is the dignity of every person. It seeks to provide inclusion for those individuals, families and communities who have been harmed by crime. Restorative justice is an itinerary, a route to reinstatement.

“All of us make mistakes in life. And all of us must ask forgiveness for these mistakes and undertake the journey of reintegration, in order not to make any more.” (Address by Pope Francis to detainees in the Isernia penitentiary, July 5, 2014)

Restorative justice provides the means or path to return home to our truest self, and to our home of family and community. While it is a road of hope taken to rebuild and heal the effects of crime, it is not the end destination. Restorative justice on its own is not enough to overcome the evil that is perpetrated by cycles of crime. The horizon of mercy is far beyond the positive results that occur when we take care of the needs of those touched by crime within the process

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of restorative justice. The horizon of mercy is an appeal at the foot of the Cross to the Lord of salvation.

The prophet Micah asks, “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8) In the Quran we find many ways of describing God’s mercy, including “Limitless is your Lord in His mercy.” (Quran 6:147) The Gospel of Matthew instructs, “Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy.” (Matthew 5:7)

In offering divine mercy to the undeserving, whether or not it has been sought, God seems to act against His own justice. Mercy is not dependent on a request from an offender or, indeed, from any sinner.

In its human dimension, mercy means being present, receiving the rage and justified anger of victims, and embracing the anguish of the person who has been harmed. Mercy is to be present to the raging pain of an offender who sometimes presents a hardened “armadillo shell”, seemingly impervious to even the simplest acts of kindness. Indeed, the fields of violence and counter-violence seem to be turning people into “wounded wolverines” and “isolated porcupines” whose tendency is to come out fighting, fierce in self-defence.

The horizon of mercy is the invitation put before us by our Holy Father, Pope Francis, in this coming Jubilee Year of Mercy. Like all horizons it may be very distant and almost impossible to consider, but if we begin by using the questions of restorative rather than criminal justice (as described above), then the horizon of the mercy and tender compassion of God’s love will overshadow even the greatest raging cry of those who need mercy most. God’s mercy, and our journey on the road to the horizon of mercy, will soothe those touched or harmed by crime, bringing a peace the world simply cannot give.

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