

Restoring the Avenues of Hope

Historically, men and women who serve long prison sentences have been remarkably successful when released. Many come to prison at a youthful age and take advantage of the opportunities for personal growth. As a result, they often become different people by the end of their sentence at the time they are eligible for release.

In the past ten years parole policies have changed. Instead of releasing this group on their first or second parole board appearance, they routinely are given many additional years to serve even when it is acknowledged that they are good candidates for release. Henry Ruth and Kevin Reitz in their book, *The Challenge of Crime: Rethinking Our Response*, state the following:

As Norval Morris has said, psychologists' powers to predict future serious violence by individuals are spectacular by scientific standards.... The best social science for adult criminals tells us that for every three criminals who fit the profile of future "dangerous offender," only one of the three will actually confirm our fears.... In order to be reasonably sure that the incapacitation net is wide enough to catch one true future offender before the crime is committed, society must be prepared to accept the human cost of the needless confinement of two innocent people.... Aggressive control measures visit predictable injustices on large numbers of needlessly incarcerated persons.¹

What Ruth and Reitz are basically saying is that statistics show 70% would be crime-free if released. When the critical factors of educational achievement, family ties, community support, spiritual growth, vocational skills, and concrete personal goals are added, the success rate may rise to well over 90%. Studies related to these factors tend to support this view.

Perhaps the greatest loss because of the recent parole policies of the past ten years has been the elimination of hope. This has been the most serious development because of "the incapacitation net." In *The Divine Comedy*, Dante encounters the inscription over the door of The Inferno: "*You who enter here, leave all hope behind.*" Many believe this is the present reality for the long-term

¹ PP. 278-79.

inmate. The Church claims to be the guardian of hope and therefore cannot allow the elimination of hope in the political and social structures of our society. We believe the Church cannot afford to make the theological concession that people in prison cannot change. There are many studies, facts, and witnesses to the reality that profound change does take place. We need to renew our faith in the potential for change and renew the hope for long-term inmates that when they commit themselves to a life-changing and life-giving path there will be fair consideration by the parole board for release.

There is within this group of long-term violent offenders many who have made significant contributions to the well-being of society after release. We are aware of over one hundred men and women who, after release, have become pastors, counselors, lawyers, social workers, family providers, businesspeople, and authors. We believe further that there are others still in the prisons with the same potential. They reflect the same characteristics and achievement but are denied parole due to the present policy that supports the “incapacitation net,” and “aggressive control measures.” This practice denies the reality that people in prison can change, and it eliminates a viable hope that should be an important part of the prison experience. We believe that the long-term violent offender should be judged on the factors that lead to personal transformation as well as the nature of the original offence.