

# CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

## AND RESTORATIVE JUSTICE



CATHOLIC MOBILIZING NETWORK

# WHEN CRIME HAPPENS...

## The U.S. legal system asks:

1. *What law was broken?*
2. *Who is guilty?*
3. *How should they be punished?*

By contrast, restorative justice asks a different set of questions that aim to help those impacted by a crime determine how to repair the harm done and live in right relationship moving forward.

## Restorative justice asks:

1. *What was the harm?*
2. *Who has been harmed?*
3. *What are the needs?*
4. *Whose obligations are these?*
5. *What should be done to put things right?*

Sometimes these questions are answered through a facilitated dialogue between the person(s) harmed, the person(s) responsible, their families, and community members.

A meaningful restorative process takes into account the basic needs for human flourishing and creates opportunities for trauma healing.

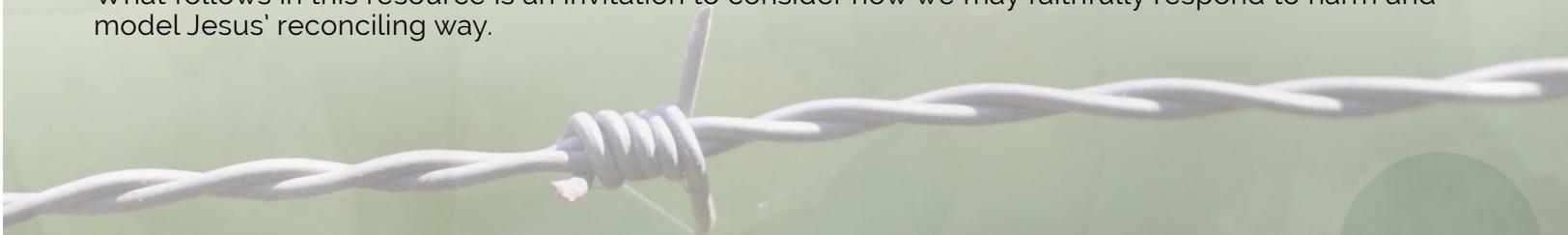
**In instances of harm and crime, dignity has been violated.**

**Restorative justice offers ways of responding to harm and crime that can repair relationships and meet the needs of all those impacted.**

The questions asked in a restorative justice approach align with principles of Catholic Social Teaching, a guide for living God's vision of justice, "where we are in right relationship with God, with one another, and with the rest of God's creation." (USCCB, *Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love*)

Exploring restorative justice through the lens of Catholic Social Teaching principles helps illuminate ways that restorative practices can transform individual relationships, communities, and systems in the spirit of healing and reconciliation.

What follows in this resource is an invitation to consider how we may faithfully respond to harm and model Jesus' reconciling way.



# LIFE AND DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON

*"What was the harm?"*

Every person is created in the image and likeness of God, and therefore has inalienable dignity — no matter the harm one has caused or suffered.

The first question that restorative justice asks is "what was the harm?" In other words, whose dignity was violated and how?

**Restorative justice upholds that the dignity and needs of each person must be at the center of a response to harm, no matter their role, because no person is disposable.**

If there were oppressive systems or conditions that contributed to the harm, the common good demands addressing those injustices as well.

## OPTION FOR/ WITH THE POOR AND VULNERABLE

*"Who has been harmed?"*

The option for/with poor and vulnerable people calls us to prioritize those who are marginalized by violence, crime, incarceration, and systemic oppression.

**By asking the question "who has been harmed?" restorative justice puts the experiences and voices of those most impacted at the center of the process.**

When crime has occurred, this means giving the victim(s) meaningful voice in the outcome and calling upon the person(s) who caused harm to make amends for the damage they caused.

In the spirit of subsidiarity, restorative practices create opportunities for those closest to the situation to participate in the decisions that will affect them.



# SOLIDARITY

*"What are the needs?"*

We are one human family and are called to be our sisters' and brothers' keepers. Because we are deeply interconnected in a web of relationships, harm has rippling effects.

**Restorative justice sees people neither as victims in need of pity nor offenders deserving of punishment, but rather as people whose lives have intersected through harmful behavior and whose needs (physical, material, emotional, and spiritual) must be met.**

This is why family members, support people, and community members are invited to be part of restorative dialogues.

Beyond particular instances of harm, practices like circle process create opportunities to slow down, share deeply, and hear one another's stories, honoring our common dignity.

# RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

*"Whose obligations are these?"*

Like Catholic Social Teaching, restorative justice recognizes that rights and responsibilities are interwoven and asks, "whose obligations are these?"

We all have basic rights to life and decency; living justly in community requires being accountable for how our choices and actions affect other people.

From this perspective, accountability can take many different forms: taking responsibility, asking for forgiveness, returning or replacing material items, making a commitment to changing behavior, etc.

**In a restorative process, ways of making amends can be mutually determined by those involved, rather than solely imposed by the criminal legal system.**

# CALL TO FAMILY, COMMUNITY, AND PARTICIPATION

*"What should be done to put things right?"*

We encounter God in our interactions with one another. Each person has a right and a duty to participate in society and holds a responsibility to work with others for the common good and well-being of all — especially the poor and vulnerable.

Restorative justice invites people to share their stories in their own terms and to hear others' stories with respect, together seeking a shared narrative of what happened, why, and how best to move forward.

**Incarceration removes a person from society. Often, victimization can have a similar effect. A restorative approach seeks ways to limit isolation and find healing in communion with one another.**

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This resource was adapted from:  
Howard Zehr (2015). *Little Book of Restorative Justice* (NY: Good Books)  
Sharpe, Susan. "Catholic Social Teaching and Restorative Justice." [catholicsmobilizing.org/justice-heals](http://catholicsmobilizing.org/justice-heals)