



#meeting14

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Meeting for Friendship amongst People
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Freedom behind bars: true rehabilitation begins from an encounter

Rimini, August 27, 2014 – The large auditorium Intesa San Paolo D5 quickly filled up this afternoon at 3 pm for the session titled “Testimonies from the Edges: Freedom behind Bars.” Among the attendees – as remarked by Nicola Boscoletto, President of Giotto Social Consortium, in Padua – there are police, surveillance judges, lawyers, former and current inmates with special permits, and their family members. The moderator introduced Patrizia Colombo, Director of the Project of the Non-profit Social Cooperative Homo Faber inside the district prison of Bassone (Como province), Rosa Alba Casella, Prison Director, Modena and Rimini, and Massimo Parisi, Director of “Seconda Casa di Reclusione” of Milan-Bollate e Guido Brambilla, Surveillance Judge at the Court of Milan, via video message, since personal reasons prevented him from attending the Meeting this year.

Boscoletto explained the extremely rough conditions of Italian prisons (and thus inmates) which were denounced by the European court of human rights of Strasbourg due to inhumane and degrading treatment. However, he remarked “what is needed is not just a formal change. It is not such a relief to have more physical space, if then you pass all your incarceration time without doing anything and without being educated to re-enter society. Giving their freedom back to them, at the end of their incarceration, would be greatly irresponsible and would lead to a return to a life of crime, which, we know in these cases is up to 80%. Something needs to be done. It is true that we are talking about people who certainly have committed terrible mistakes, some very serious ones, but let’s not forget that we are still talking about human beings.”

Boscoletto then recounted what has been done at the Meeting from 2006 (when it was decided to focus on article 27 of the Italian Constitution) until now. The most moving and intense moment of this kaleidoscope of faces and encounters is the Meeting of 2008, during which some inmates volunteered as tour guides at the exhibit titled “To Redeem by Keeping Watch.” On that occasion, some exhibit tours were also organized for children. One of these children asked an inmate with a life sentence: ‘Why didn’t you think twice before shooting your gun?’ That simple question, sprung forth from an 8-year old girl’s heart, made that man painfully aware of all the evil he had committed, to the point where he truly began to atone for his crime. This is the reason why we believe that true atonement begins with an encounter.”

Then it was Patrizia Colombo’s turn. She recounted her experience which began in a moment of great difficulty. At that time, she decided to collaborate with the district prison of Bassone to lay out the *Homo Faber* project aimed at beginning a print shop within the prison walls. Her words illustrate that “a positive gaze on reality is possible only if we first experience such a gaze on us.” In her case, this gaze was given to inmates and it brought out “unexpected and stable fruits of rebirth.” This gaze became so stable that they became the place for a lived friendship and the desire to build a dwelling-place: a house that could welcome inmates and former inmates with their families. Touching pieces from inmate’s letters (now our friends) document this impossible change. Colombo concluded by reading an excerpt from a letter written by an Albanian inmate: “When unexpected charity meets you through a human face, you understand that this is what you had been looking for.”



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Rosa Alba Casella began her talk by stating: "I hope this event becomes the opportunity to create a link between the Rimini Meeting and the district prison of Rimini. This prison, also from a physical view point, is located in an area which hides it from the rest of the town. This, I believe, is due to a modern tendency, for which we want to hide from our eyes all that unsettles and disturbs us. Losers are in prison, a threat for society." The European court denunciations and the several appeals made by President Napolitano (the President of the Italian Republic) didn't affect public opinion. "I feel that nobody is touched by inhumane conditions in prisons, because they concern people who didn't respect the rules. However, it has been widely demonstrated that inhumane detention conditions are a heavy obstacle to recovery, because inmates begin to loathe society and the neglected conditions where they live contribute to increase such rejection. Human dignity needs to remain inviolate also in prison, because that is not something one gains through merits and loses through mistakes." Since all that happens 'outside' affects what happens 'inside' "I believe that the fact that inmates are given the chance to build a better life for themselves depends on the chance that their community grants them in the way they regard them."

Massimo Parisi's talk was also truly appreciated, also because, as Boscoletto remarked, the prison in Bollate is a model correctional facility in our country. "I came close to the prison world in a theoretical way, after studying it for a few years. At 23, all I knew were academic notions, which didn't really have a lot to do with the recovery of inmates. I realized that we often mark the criminal by the crime he committed, we marginalize him from society, disregarding the fact that each one of us has capabilities, potential, resources and gifts of which he may not be aware."

The goal of the recovery process, continues Parisi, is that of listening, following and accompanying each inmate to return to society. In addition to that, at the end of their sentence, we need to think about a smooth transition into work through social services or alternatives to prison. Parisi then proposed some options for integration after time in prison. Former inmates are rarely valued: they should instead be inserted into work environments after they have been accompanied through an adequate process. Parisi continued by saying that we cannot go anywhere if we are alone, and pointing out the personal and common destiny marking both inmates and their victims and speaking about the *Demetra* project, in which inmates, through their work, raise funds to compensate their victims.

Brambilla manifested great worry for inmates' families and their victims in his video presentation. "Detention is a fundamental aspect of atonement, but the rehabilitation aspect is the decisive one. Alternative measures of reparation and recovery are very important. Humanization of punishment is a necessary social aspect to allow inmates to recover and go back to society." This is another way in which "Destiny didn't abandon man," in particular, He doesn't abandon "who strays from the right path." Social institutions should be close both to "the ones who make mistakes and the ones who suffer the destructive consequences of a crime."

Boscoletto concluded by showing an image of Pope Francis visiting the Isernia prison and reminds everybody of a sentence the Pope pronounced on that occasion: "Why he is there instead of me? I'd have many more reasons to be in prison... To think about this does me good, because we have the same weaknesses. Why did he fall and I did not? This, for me, is a mystery which makes me pray and makes me feel close to inmates."

(M.G.D'A. - F.Po.)

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