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Harm, Healing, and Human Dignity: A Catholic Encounter with Restorative Justice

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Book Review:

Harm, Healing, and Human Dignity: A Catholic Encounter with Restorative Justice

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Harm, Healing, and Human Dignity: A Catholic Encounter with Restorative Justice. Adapted by Caitlin Morneau. Liturgical Press Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2019, 66 pp., (paper) ISBN978-0-08146-6441-4; (eBook) ISBN 9780814664162, \$7.95.

The issue of how to deal with criminal justice has continued to draw mixed reactions from different schools of thought. The advocates of retributive justice argue that it is necessary that the rule of law be applied to all cases. Their argument is that this will prevent further criminal activities. This has been contested by advocates of restorative justice who argue that underlying all conflicts is a deep division among people. Restorative justice advocates are characterised as willing to compromise rights to attain their end and retributive justice advocates have been seen as idealistic in addressing issues of criminal justice. Definitely there is a need for a balance between principle and pragmatism.

The book under review, basing itself on the Catholic Social Teaching, spells out the need to focus on reconciliation, which will eventually lead to the creation of communities of hope. This means that we shall be tougher on the crime committed and easier on the person accused of a felony.

The book gives a Catholic perspective on criminal justice. The sanctity of human life is very important and to that end, it advocates the end of the death penalty. It advocates a move from punitive justice to restorative justice. This will create communities of hope which will start moving from the culture of death and darkness to the culture of life, healing and hope.

The book offers an in-depth examination of our punitive criminal justice system and offers restorative justice as a panacea. In this way, it argues that by bringing about justice, which is the spirit of equity that considers the particular needs of each person, then we shall have reconciled communities. It also means treating the victim and the offender with dignity. Restorative justice questions whether punishment is the only way to achieve justice. For every harm that is committed, there are two possible results. The first is of criminal nature which causes an injury. Criminal justice seems to concentrate on this aspect and calls for the punishment of the offender. The second effect is civil. Here there are many issues that need to be addressed like emotional, spiritual, physical, material, and communal consequences. These cannot be adequately addressed by criminal justice. The book proposes a culture of encounter, shared reflection, discernment and community building. This is a process where the victim plays a major role in determining what justice should look like.

The book aims in transforming criminal justice as we have it today and create a system that will create common humanity and dignity. The book allows the reader to a fuller understanding of how restorative justice and Catholic social teaching embrace one another in a way that leads to the creation of communities of hope.

I think this book would be much stronger if it addressed the concerns of Human Rights Activists, especially those in communities where individuals have taken crime to be their way of life.

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I recommend this book for undergraduates who are grappling with the idea of punitive justice and would like to understand how the other forms of justice can be applied. The book will be of value for those who advocate the end of the death penalty, and those working in the judiciary. Church leadership will welcome this book as support for their pastoral ministry.