



Principles in Action: Tracing Catholic Social Tradition in Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program Courses

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SUSAN SHARPE

*Principles in Action: Tracing Catholic Social Tradition in Inside-Out  
Prison Exchange Program Courses*



**ABSTRACT:** The national Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program anchors hundreds of college and university courses that examine crime and justice from a range of disciplinary perspectives, and through a pedagogy that fosters dialogue between students from a college campus and people who are incarcerated. While Inside-Out pedagogy is secular in nature, one can see principles of Catholic Social Tradition laced into its design. This paper opens with a brief description of the Inside-Out model and then traces, first in the model and then in this author's particular Inside-Out course, a range of Catholic Social Tradition principles: human dignity, the common good, solidarity, participation, subsidiarity, and rights and duties.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1995 Lori Pompa took a group of Temple University students to a state prison in Dallas, Pennsylvania, where they met with a group of men housed there. Together the two groups talked about how race and class, politics and economics, intersected with crime and justice. As the session finished and the students prepared to leave, one of the men asked Pompa whether she had ever considered having that kind of conversation across a semester, as a class held at the prison. No, she had not, she said. But she immediately designed one (Pompa 2013, 128).

By 2002 Pompa's course was well established, along with a Think Tank in which course alumni could continue working together toward re-educating the public about crime and justice. One of the Think Tank's first decisions was to make Inside-Out a national model, and Soros Foundation funding led to the first seven day National Instructor Training Institute, held in 2004 (Pompa 2013, 130). Since then, the Inside-Out Center has offered dozens of training courses, for hundreds of instructors, who in turn have taught many hundreds of college and university courses across the US, Canada, and beyond, involving more than 12,000 students. Inside-Out courses span the social sciences, the arts and humanities, and law (Pompa 2013, 131).

While Inside-Out courses look at crime and justice from a wide range of academic disciplines, they all have several things in common: equal numbers of incarcerated people (*inside students*) and students from a nearby campus (*outside students*) meet weekly at the prison for an academic term, taking a credit-bearing course together. Inside and outside students do the same reading and writing assignments, work together on class projects, and learn with each other through extensive dialogue. A key principle in all Inside-Out courses is equality, with each student having equal voice and an equal stake in the learning process (Pompa 2013, 129). Outside students do not go into a prison to observe or to research a vulnerable population; they are not there to mentor or otherwise help those on the inside. Nor are they there to forge lasting friendships<sup>1</sup> or to engage in advocacy. Rather, they are there to learn with and from people whose experiences and perspectives are different from their own.

Inside-Out pedagogy is secular in nature but one can see, laced into its design, principles expressed that lie at the heart of the Catholic Social Tradition. This paper begins by tracing several such principles that are evident in the teaching model that all Inside-Out courses follow: human dignity, the common good, solidarity with the marginalized, and the importance of participation. The paper then looks at how the author's particular Inside-Out course honors these specific principles and also two others: subsidiarity, and rights and duties. The paper concludes with observations about Inside-Out's link with the call to action that anchors Catholic Social Tradition.

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<sup>1</sup> All Inside-Out courses observe strict protocols in which inside and outside students recognize and address each other by first names only. They share no other identifying information, and have no contact beyond the classroom.

## CATHOLIC SOCIAL TRADITION PRINCIPLES IN THE INSIDE-OUT MODEL

### *Human dignity*

Perhaps most obviously, Inside-Out courses reflect a respect for human dignity. As stated in the 2004 Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, “the human individual possesses the dignity of a person, who is not just something, but someone. He is capable of self-knowledge, of self-possession and of freely giving himself and entering into communion with other persons” (Compendium 2004, 108). Dignity is honored in several ways in the Inside-Out model, starting with the kind of space it creates. In an Inside-Out classroom there are no inmates, no convicts, no visitors; there are only students. Inside and outside students sit beside each other in a large circle, alternating inside-outside-inside-outside all the way around. Outside of class, the two groups are separated by distance and by prison walls. During class, however, both to each other and to their instructors, they all are simply students.

In the Inside-Out model, even heinous behavior does not strip away one’s inherent human dignity. Inside-Out courses do exclude people who are incarcerated because of a sexualized assault conviction; this restriction is a measure reflecting institutional caution. Overall, however, the type of crime committed has no bearing on the courses. We instructors do not ask (and coach our outside students not to ask), nor would we turn someone away from the class purely on the basis of a violent past. Many inside students do reveal in the course of the sessions that they have harmed people in serious ways, but this act neither defines nor has bearing on the work we do together. In the classroom they are students. They are whole human beings, flawed, like all of us, rich with complexity and potential.

In Inside-Out courses, the personhood and inherent dignity of incarcerated people comes alive both for inside and for outside students. For example, in a recent course, an inside student announced that he would not be finishing the course because he had won early release from prison; the rest of us had mixed feelings in response: genuine happiness for him and sadness for ourselves on losing him from the course. In her next written assignment, an outside student noted that her reaction to his news helped her realize how far she had come. She said that, before taking the class, if she had heard that someone was being released from prison, she would have felt fear. She would have assumed that he posed a threat because he had been in prison. But now she knew how much he loved his family, how much he wanted to get back to work, how eager he was to put his life back together. Now she could see and respect him as a person, and see his release from prison as a good thing.

Dignity is also evident when instructors judge inside students by the same standards as outside students. At the end of one semester, an inside student recalled coming into class the week after he had turned in his first paper, feeling confident that it was better than others’ and expecting to find praise in our written comments on it. Instead he found a detailed critique of where and how the paper had fallen short of the assignment. In recounting this, he thanked us for respecting him. He said that, because we took him seriously as a student, instead of patronizing him, he began taking himself seriously as a student too.

Perhaps the clearest evidence we have seen of dignity through the Inside-Out pedagogy came in one of the first classes I co-taught. After the first session, when inside and outside

students met together and began discussing assigned reading, an inside student wrote that being with us had made him feel alive for the first time since he had been locked up. He wrote that simply being with people who shared his interest in discussing relevant issues let him know that he was not alone behind the prison wall. He said that he left class that night feeling euphoric and thinking, “I am a person!” Pedagogy that reminds someone *I am a person* is creating a much needed space.

### ***Common good***

Inside-Out courses also align with a second Catholic Social Tradition principle: a commitment to the common good—that is, to “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily” (Compendium 2004, 164). Probably every academic course aims to help its students reach their own personal fulfillment more fully and easily, but courses that include incarcerated students may be making a special contribution to the common good, in two ways. One is by offering an educational opportunity to people held in prisons, who since 1994 have had restricted access to higher education (Clarke 2012; Palmer 2012; Torre and Fine 2005). The second is by benefitting the communities that people return to on being released from prison,<sup>2</sup> given the demonstrated link between education and reduced recidivism (Kim and Clark 2013).

Inside-Out pedagogy also serves the common good of a classroom community, through the model’s insistence that every student’s learning is as important as any other’s. Inside-Out courses are not created so that outside students can study another population or serve a disadvantaged group. Rather, Inside-Out courses create an opportunity for inside and outside students to learn with and from each other, as peers, and the Inside-Out model demands care in the way it is carried out to ensure that neither group is privileged over the other. In practical terms, this means for example that instructors do not assign papers that incarcerated students cannot adequately research because they lack access to real or virtual libraries. It means not emailing information to outside students without also making copies of the same information and delivering it to inside students. It means requiring inside and outside students to pull equal weight in designing and carrying out their group projects.

### ***Solidarity***

A third Catholic Social Tradition principle evident in Inside-Out courses is solidarity, that is, “*a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good*” (Compendium 2004, 193; italics in original). Any commitment to the common good requires knowing how others in a shared society fare. Yet it is not easy to know how people fare behind the walls and wires that keep them in prison and effectively keep others out. Inside-Out courses create an opportunity for a broad array of people on the outside to learn what life is like for people on the inside. In learning about the U.S. criminal justice system outside students gain significant knowledge of how our criminal justice system operates in people’s lives (Austin and Irwin 2012), not only by reading but through actual face-to-face dialogue with people whose lives are literally shaped by this system. Inevitably, that knowledge

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<sup>2</sup> Of the people sentenced to state prisons, 95% will be released at some point back to their communities. ([www.bjs.gov/content/reentry/releases.cfm](http://www.bjs.gov/content/reentry/releases.cfm))

discomfits them. Studying with inside students makes it impossible for outside students to ignore the fact that if, as Catholic Social Tradition avows, “we are *all* really responsible *for all*” (Compendium 2004, 193; italics in original), then our communities are failing that responsibility.

Solidarity includes a recognition of “the composite ties that unite [people] and social groups . . . seeking points of possible agreement where attitudes of separation and fragmentation prevail” (Compendium 2004, 194). Such recognition is built into Inside-Out courses, which bring together two groups of people who in many ways are very different from each other. Most inside and outside students differ from each other at least in terms of criminal history and educational attainment (although some inside students have college degrees), and they often differ as well in terms of family income levels, the kinds of neighborhoods they grew up in, and social norms they take as givens. As they get to know each other and explore course material together, the two groups discover how much they have in common, how little they have to fear in each other, and how easily their life trajectories could have been traded if their childhood circumstances had been different.

### ***Participation***

Catholic Social Tradition also highlights the significance of participation—that is, of “activities by means of which the citizen . . . contributes to the cultural, economic, political and social life of the civil community to which he belongs” (Compendium 2004 189)—and, we could add, to the educational life of that community. An Inside-Out course brings intellectual and social interaction to people who are literally separated from the rest of society—often hundreds or thousands of miles from their homes, families, and communities—and increases the reach of their participation in dialogue about crucial aspects of our civil community.

By their nature, then, irrespective of specific subject matter, Inside-Out courses reflect the Catholic Social Tradition principles of human dignity, common good, solidarity, and participation. Individual Inside-Out courses might serve these principles in different ways, and might express other principles. For example, the course I co-teach reflects Catholic Social Tradition principles as already described here; through its particular content it also aligns more specifically with common good, and it expresses two other Catholic Social Tradition principles as well: subsidiarity, and rights and duties.

## **CATHOLIC SOCIAL TRADITION PRINCIPLES IN ONE INSIDE-OUT COURSE**

This author’s Inside-Out course, co-taught with Ed Kelly, is called “Rethinking Crime and Justice: Explorations from the Inside Out.”<sup>3</sup> This course meets weekly every fall semester at the Westville Correctional Facility, just under an hour away from the University of Notre Dame, where our outside students are enrolled. This course takes a look at our criminal justice system through the lens of restorative justice—asking how we as a society

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<sup>3</sup> Ed Kelly and I both attended the Inside-Out training held at Dearborn, MI, in 2011, and began teaching our course in 2012. At the time of this writing we had offered it five times, for 32 students each time, at the Westville Correctional Facility in Westville, IN, about an hour from the University of Notre Dame, where our outside students are enrolled.

ought to respond to crime, and making the claim that we all need to take responsibility for answering that question well. Therefore, the course invites students to think critically about what our justice institutions should be accomplishing, and how well the current system aligns with those aims. In the course we look, for example, at privilege—especially, though not only, white privilege—and its effects in fostering crime, in shaping who goes to prison, and in stigmatizing people who have criminal records. We look at how victims, families, and communities are affected by crime, paying attention to the extensive ripple effect that radiates from one single incident of harm. We look, too, at how offenders, families, and communities are affected by our country’s reliance on incarceration in recent decades—including ways that families feel punished by a loved one’s incarceration and ways that incarceration erodes the health of targeted neighborhoods. We look at the range of obstacles people face when they come out of prison, and ask how their responsibilities to their communities should be balanced against their communities’ responsibilities to them. We look at some of the alternatives gradually emerging, giving at least the hope of new approaches in prosecution, in sentencing, and in corrections. And we look at DeFina and Hannon’s claim that Catholic Social Tradition importantly challenges mass incarceration, through which “entire communities have been damaged, suffering perilous losses to their collective social, cultural, and physical capital” (2011: 13).

### *Common good*

Our course pays attention to the common good, not only through the Inside-Out model but also by pointing our students’ attention to the wide-ranging harms triggered by crime, and from our institutional responses to it. Realizing such effects surprises our students, both inside and outside. Inside students tell us they had never before thought about the victims of their crimes, or had not realized just how much harm they likely had caused. Inside and outside students alike say they had not considered the reach of harm that typically extends out from individual criminal incidents. It is news for virtually all of our students to learn, for example, that crime victims suffer higher rates of PTSD, depression, substance abuse, and suicide than others in the population (Hembree and Foa 2003; Andrews, Brewin, and Rose 2003; Herman 2010); that crime victims are more likely than the general population to be victimized again (Kilpatrick and Acierno 2003; Herman 2010); that children who are victimized are more likely to become offenders (Fagan and Mazerolle 2011; Herman 2010); that the costs attached to a single crime—including victims’ direct costs (e.g., property loss, lost earnings, medical costs) and intangible costs (e.g., pain and suffering, distress, and decreased quality of life), criminal justice system costs (police, courts, and corrections), and crime career costs (i.e., the opportunity costs resulting from illegal rather than legal and productive activities)—range (in 2008 dollars) from \$3,500 for theft, to \$42,000 for robbery, to \$241,000 for rape/sexual assault, to \$9 million for murder (McCollister, French, and Fang 2010).

Students also are surprised to realize some of the hidden costs that follow on from how we respond to crime. It is easy to budget for law enforcement, courts, and corrections, but little if any attention is paid to the financial and relational hardships often created by taking out of the home the economic, emotional, and parenting support an incarcerated person had been providing (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, and Joest 2003; Turanovic, Rodriguez, and Pratt 2012). And, as yet, not nearly enough attention has been paid to the broader effects

of our country's reliance on incarceration—effects “on civic and political participation, on fundamental notions of citizenship, on the allocation of public resources, and on the functioning of the polity and government” (Travis and Western 2014, 303).

### *Subsidiarity*

Our own particular course reflects a commitment to restorative justice, which posits that repair ought to be a priority in how a community responds to crime (Zehr 2002; Zehr 2015). Restorative justice leans, in at least two ways, toward subsidiarity, the principle that it is wrong to hand over to a higher association what lower-level social entities could do (Compendium 2004, 185-186). First, restorative justice calls for the meaningful involvement of those most affected by what has happened (Van Ness and Strong 2002, 41). Whereas conventional justice processes push victims to the sideline and effectively silence offenders (Bibos 2012, 16-17), restorative justice gives victims a central role and encourages offenders to speak for themselves rather than through legal representatives. Second, restorative justice assumes that accountability should be rooted in what is meaningful to those who have been harmed, not only in legal frameworks and precedents (Zehr 2015, 47).

With respect to crime, in the United States at least, subsidiarity has gradually been eroded as communities have come to rely more and more heavily on law enforcement, not only for egregious behavior but also for much that used to be handled informally. For example, it has become common for school administrators to call in the police to charge students for behaviors that used to be handled in the principal's office (Sussman 2012; Na and Gottfredson 2013). This is a concern because, as Nils Christie pointed out in his now classic argument, human conflicts properly belong to the people involved in them, not to agents of the state. By handing conflicts over to professionals we lose out on important aspects of community life (Christie 1977).

One key premise built into our Inside-Out course is the restorative justice principle that decisions about crime should include those who are closest to it. To that end, the course exposes students to some concrete ways in which stakeholders can be meaningfully involved in regular criminal justice practice. For example, students learn about dialogue processes that can bring together the people most involved in and affected by a crime. At the least, these processes create mechanisms by which people can feel meaningfully involved in how a crime is handled; they can ask questions that might otherwise have gone unaddressed, and can tell the story of what happened, telling it in their own terms rather than as shaped by a court official's questions or as dictated by the official boundaries of a witness impact statement (Zehr 2002). Subsidiarity is further met in situations where such stakeholders are not only permitted to meet and communicate about what happened, but also to decide together on sanctions to be carried out (as in diversion programs), or on sentencing recommendations to be submitted to a judge (as in cases of more serious crime). In another example, students learn about Circles of Support and Accountability, in which community members regularly meet with someone recently released from prison, build relationships that help that person become solidly established in the community while also monitoring (in consultation with therapists) that person's behavior and the temptations he or she is faced with. This combination of relationship building and monitoring is particularly significant in cases where someone has served time for sexualized violence. In that context, Circles of Support and Accountability are more effective at ensuring community safety

than professional monitoring alone (Hanvey and Hoing 2013).

Also to the end of fostering greater subsidiarity in the criminal justice context, our course argues that community members need to reclaim a sense of responsibility for criminal justice, and we invite our students to begin exploring questions that should concern all of us as community members: What do we want our criminal justice system to accomplish? What values do we want law enforcement and the courts' work to reflect most clearly? What are the goals we want our criminal justice institutions to strive for? How well are these values being exemplified and these goals accomplished? For too long, such questions have been handed upward to be handled by legal experts and other professionals, and it is important that community members reclaim their role in articulating the values and goals that a community's institutions should be built on. While there is no question the state has a key role in criminal justice, there also should be no question that community members have a key role too (Christie 1977; Van Ness and Strong 2002)—not only to participate in proceedings in which they have a direct stake, but also to participate in the public discourse that shapes those proceedings.

### *Rights and duties*

Our course also aligns with the principle that rights and duties are indissoluble: “In human society to one man's right there corresponds a duty in all other persons . . . . Those, therefore, who claim their own rights, yet altogether forget or neglect to carry out their respective duties, are people who build with one hand and destroy with the other” (Compendium 2004: 156). This principle is relevant especially when we turn students' attention to the challenges faced by people coming out of prison and returning to their communities (Hallett 2012; Woods et al. 2013). We do ask students to consider the implications of this principle at the individual level in thinking about what the returning person needs, and needs to do, in order to desist from further crime and succeed on the outside. However, we also ask our students to consider a corresponding question: What must that person's community do in order to increase the odds that she or he will stay out of prison? In other words, if, as Catholic Social Tradition claims, “we are *all* really responsible *for all*” (Compendium 2004: 193), then what is the community's responsibility in helping people thrive on the outside? In other words, we ask students to consider not only what might be operating in Them, but also what is operating in Us that allows or encourages criminal behavior to develop or recur.<sup>4</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Readers familiar with Catholic Social Tradition might be waiting for a discussion of how this course, or any Inside-Out course, reflects an option for the poor and vulnerable. I have not dealt with such discussion because Inside-Out is not, as previously mentioned, about “doing something for” a vulnerable population, rather, it is about “doing something with”—with people who happen to have crucial knowledge of an issue that shapes us all, in ways

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<sup>4</sup> Note that these questions invite more than an analysis of social problems and/or of the degree to which social conditions might be criminogenic. These questions invite self-reflection, by community members, for the sake of accountability.

that most of us don't recognize. We teach Inside-Out in order to challenge the privileged more than to help the vulnerable, and to engage the range of perspectives required for understanding the complexity of criminal justice and community responsibility. While inside students might qualify as vulnerable because their voices are routinely silenced or ignored, that is not why we include them. We do so because the course's goal is to increase citizens' awareness of, and sense of responsibility for, criminal justice. Like outside students, inside students are part of the citizenry we hope will take on the work of change.

Inside-Out courses are rooted in two fundamental convictions. One is that, as a society, we dare not remain ignorant of the carceral state we are living in and its unprecedented reach into our lives and institutions (Beckett and Murakawa 2012).

As Pompa says, "Inside-Out is about walls—walls of our own making, as well as walls constructed by others. Some of these walls are made of bricks—but all are held in place by the mortar of fear and ignorance. We fear what we don't know—in others, in the world, even in ourselves. So, we build walls, thinking we can keep ourselves safe from whatever we imagine is threatening us. It is a dangerous delusion" (Pompa 2013: 133, emphasis in original).

The second is that we cannot hope to understand that carceral state, or to change it for the better, unless we lock arms with the people most affected by incarceration and together ensure that our perspective is wide enough to see all that matters. Inside-Out courses give students—both inside and outside—a way to start that work, and what they discover can be transformative. At the end of our Inside-Out course in 2014, an outside student wrote that she had taken the course in order to learn specifically what in the prison environment and incarceration process made the system such a broken one. But through the course, she said, "I found out that I was wrong—not about the fact that the criminal justice system is broken, but about what the word 'system' entails. The system is not the prison grounds and courtrooms. Yes, these are components of the system . . . but the majority of the system is us, the non-incarcerated of our communities."

This student got what might be the most important point of our course, that is, that our criminal justice system operates in our names. As long as we are blind to the system's operations and effects, then we are neglecting our responsibilities and obligations as social beings. Inside-Out courses offer one vehicle for helping people learn about criminal justice and think together about those responsibilities. Moreover, they offer a way to enact the principles of Catholic Social Tradition in the context of criminal justice, where currently there is devastating need.

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