

Life in Freedom after Detention for Former Convicts in Italy

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ABSTRACT: This article presents the work of rehabilitation and social integration of prisoners and former prisoners in Italian detention facilities. It describes the efforts of voluntary associations and the Catholic Church, in collaboration with territorial cooperatives, to mediate between the restrictive system and the real world of work. The article describes how churches in Rome and Bologna, in partnership with local industries, employed and trained prisoners, providing them with job opportunities after imprisonment toward real integration into society. The Church is concerned with the moral aspect, without which the temptation to return to a life of ease and immediate gain would be almost impossible in the society of Italy in an economic crisis. The missions of the Orthodox Church in Italy follow these models to help Romanian prisoners with prize permits and other facilities towards release.

KEYWORDS: rehabilitation, reintegration, former convicts, church mission, good practices

Introduction

In the proximity of release from detention, inmates need a tool to orient themselves upon leaving the prison system. Exiting prison represents a moment of solid disorientation, especially for those without resources or contacts in the territory. The Antigone Association, which monitors detention conditions within penitentiary institutions in each Italian region, has set out to provide a detailed guidebook based on the most felt needs and requirements of those released from prison (Gentile and Sbraccia 2020, 19). The association has been active since 2001, and monitoring is done through the internal magazine *Osservatore*, published on the website of the Antigone Onlus Association (www.antigone.it). These guiding and informative tools were intended to aid various social workers in penitentiaries involved in reintegration. Two other essential guides would be: "Taking Freedom: What to Do Once You're Out of Prison" (Antigone 2019) and "Once Outside: A Guide, Paths, and Opportunities in Bologna After Sentencing", which present all the most suitable steps for initial reintegration into society, attempting to provide answers to all potential primary needs that a former inmate may have at the time of release: job search, economic assistance, dependency issues, health, parental education, document and certificate creation, or ongoing legal matters.

These guidebooks aim to make these subjects aware of what they can and cannot do, whom they can turn to, and especially what rights they have to apply. Some guides consider the essential nature of the orientation issue for ex-inmates, providing helpful guidance on finding a general practitioner with advice aimed at both Italian and foreign individuals (Antigone 2019, 4-21). There are also sections dedicated to those seeking practical

information for obtaining services and benefits available to those who are or are about to become parents. The guide explains finding a municipal nursery and accessing various bonuses, allowances, or tax deductions (Antigone 2019, 68-88). In many situations, inmates often find themselves with unresolved legal issues and prison without being aware of it. For example, a former inmate may request a certificate of criminal charges from the court, which allows them to become aware of ongoing judicial proceedings against them and any possible defences.

Additionally, they can address the Supervision Court for rehabilitation to expunge their criminal record. Knowledge of the legal situation can be obtained by requesting the following documents: Certification of registration in the crime information register, providing knowledge of registrations against the individual for criminal offences; Certificate of criminal charges regarding any ongoing criminal proceedings; Certificate of criminal record, allowing knowledge of final judgments and specific provisions regarding the limitation of civil capacity; certificate of completion of sentence, a certificate of serving a prison sentence requested from the Penitentiary Execution Office located at the Prosecutor's Office; viewing of records present in the criminal record, to view records against the interested party at the Criminal Record Office (Antigone 2019, 56).

These guides help those in marginal states avoid falling back into criminal dynamics. However, this possibility depends not only on individuals but also on the context of acceptance or rejection surrounding them. In this sense, Antigone's guide allows them to have a tool to lean on and escape from the perspective of selection and rewards promoted by penitentiary institutions and to enter into the perspective and concreteness of real and equal possibilities. Associations aim to raise citizens' awareness about the guarantees and rights of detainees within the penal system, so they perceive the importance of punishment as implemented beyond the walls of prisons (Gentile and Sbraccia 2020, 96).

Research Methodology

We initiated this research from a guide that reveals a mapping of offers and services dedicated explicitly to former inmates or individuals serving sentences and, to a greater extent, marginalized subjects. One of the projects that developed a guide was based on funding granted by the Fondazione del Monte from Bologna and Ravenna, starting in September 2019 and ending in December 2021. Various institutional references were involved, such as the director of the "Rocco d'Amato" Penitentiary in Bologna and the director of the educational area, regional and municipal Guarantees of Persons Deprived of Liberty, the municipality of Bologna represented by the counsellor for social policies, the director of the health area in prisons in the Emilia Romagna region, and the director of the penal execution area in the same region. Also involved was the contact person from the A.S.P. in the municipality of Bologna, Uiepe managers, and subsequently, various social workers divided into intervention areas: health, employment, housing, and volunteering. Then, through interviews, we contacted individuals in alternative measures and former inmates to directly understand their desires, expectations and needs during the transition from inside to outside as they approached the end of their detention period.

Prisons in Bologna and Rome are at the forefront, both regionally and nationally, regarding numerous projects implemented in favor of incarcerated individuals, such as continuing courses activated within the prison and investing in alternative measures. The perspective of the Church and volunteer associations is to involve as many restricted subjects as possible in the alternative method of serving sentences outside of prison, leading to a general increase in subjects under penal control. In this case, we are talking about the widening network effect, a concept introduced by sociologist S. Cohen, used to indicate the

risk associated with introducing new forms of punishment and expanding social control (Cohen 1985).

The Path to Release from Prison

The imminent release from the prison system represents a particularly delicate moment in the lives of inmates, underscoring the importance of inmates' connections with the outside world and social reintegration implemented based on individualized criteria tailored to the specific circumstances of each individual. Penitentiary treatment should aim to cultivate skills that can support social reintegration. However, before discussing the release of convicted offenders, there must be a scientific and spiritual observation of their personality, identifying moral and psychophysical deficiencies or other causes that led to the commission of the crime, and proposing an appropriate reintegration program.

However, in recent years, the personnel of psychologists and penitentiary educators has been severely reduced. According to the updated transparency records as of May 2023, the total number of effective educators is 803, compared to 923 in the staffing scheme. The national average number of detainees under the care of each agent is 71. There are 100 institutions out of 191 with a detainee/educator ratio higher than the average and far from the target of 65 established by D.A.P. Chaplain priests, even though they are not officially part of the institutional system for monitoring inmate behavior, are best positioned to observe "scientifically," from a perspective of psycho-spirituality, the causes and motivations that led the offender to commit the criminal act. It is also chaplains who most assist offenders in reflecting on the consequences of their actions, especially for the victim, and any potential reparative actions. Time, introspection through models of repentance from the Bible (Rotaru 2015, 318-322) and the lives of saints, as well as the illumination of conscience by the Holy Spirit through prayer, formulate the best indications regarding rehabilitative treatment and establish a corresponding program that integrates or adjusts according to the needs that arise during the execution of the sentence.

Research conducted on the topic of recidivism reveals how, among individuals sentenced to imprisonment, those who take advantage of treatment opportunities during detention are less likely to return to crime. The chances decrease even further among those subjected to alternative measures without remaining within prison walls (Antigone 2017, 25-27). The duration of the sentence can influence the interest and participation in these training courses. One factor is a sentence of over ten years, while another is less than five years (Antigone 2020, 16).

Rehabilitation and integration projects can be destabilized by the discomfort of overcrowding and the lack of legal-pedagogical staff. Due to the large number of inmates (overcrowding) and the shortage of personnel, young people who enter penitentiary structures for the first time, who should serve around one year of detention without educational-rehabilitative support, have exacerbated the criminal activities they had committed. If the penitentiary educational system does not take care of young people, another "system" does, the internal-criminal system, where other "educators," the "veterans" of the place, convey an interpretation of events and facts, not from the point of view of justice or God's law, but from the perspective of "criminal law," where everything is justified according to antisocial mentalities, blaming society as unjust and justifying the most socially disadvantaged, namely themselves (Gentile and Sbraccia 2020, 72).

Another aspect that can condition the success of the intramural setting is the subjective situation of the inmate: Italian prisons are often inhabited by individuals who come from circuits of severe marginalization, for whom the absence of employment, adequate education, or the presence of dependency issues or irregularity are closely linked to the process of criminalization and the experience of detention. Prior to the deprivation of

liberty, such a pre-existing situation can sometimes influence not only the way of "doing time" but also the possibility of activating paths within the prison that can continue outside of it (Mosconi 2001, 3-35).

In this regard, the social resources held before incarceration are evaluated based on risk management. They are sometimes more important than the trajectory within the institution, betraying the principle of "individualization" that underpins penitentiary treatment. The result is a mechanism of selection by the penitentiary institution itself, which is compelled, also due to the persistent shortage of resources, to preferentially invest in those who not only demonstrate a willingness to adhere to the offer but also possess personal and social resources capable of reducing the hypotheses of project failure or the particular precariousness of trajectories. This element has become apparent in interviews with individuals who have been released from prison and are currently in alternative measures. They assert that few benefit from a rehabilitative journey. One must have an extraordinary will to obtain this privilege. Differentiation, not to mention discrimination, begins even in restrictive conditions; there are preferential differences between Italian inmates and others. Once released, the differences are further amplified, and the opportunities for them to find work or social integration are almost non-existent (Gentile and Sbraccia 2020, 12).

Within the rehabilitation program, it becomes evident whether the convict becomes repentant or not. It can be seen if they engage in self-criticism or consistently absolve themselves if they have understood and assumed their mistake in a reparative manner or stubbornly justify it. Some individuals have received many benefits from educators, social workers, and parents, but due to a lack of self-critical introspection, after a few months, they return to detention. They perceived only what they received without giving anything in return. They enjoyed privileges without any obligations or corrections. They realized the comfort of prison and how easy it is to leave. This type of person suffered more than those who did not have support in prison but changed for the better. The most pitiful were those who remained imprisoned without change (Gentile and Sbraccia 2020, 14).

Benefiting from the proposed treatment, even if limited to certain activities or managing to establish a few significant relationships within the institution (such as volunteer organizations), can be the premise of a path oriented towards subsequent reintegration (Antigone 2021, 33-35).

Subjects burdened by addiction problems and never intercepted by Ser.D.P. (pathological addiction services) or foreigners without a stable residence permit, paradoxically, prison represents the first moment where they can start rehabilitation programs or receive medical-therapeutic assistance. In this sense, the relationship between the prison and the territory is of fundamental importance, contributing to the consolidation of autonomy projects initiated internally (Giorgi 2014, 18-32; Ronco and Torrente 2017).

Being present in a correctional facility can bring the benefit of residency. Through resident status, the inmate can receive support outside the prison, a prerequisite for accessing fundamental rights and services. Large segments of the detained population, generally foreigners in irregular conditions or individuals from significantly disadvantaged situations, establish residence within the institution where they are placed. After a certain period has passed since the release, their registration in the institution's records will be automatically cancelled, risking being left without a residency registration and unable to establish any connection with the territory.

Another critical aspect in the transition between the inside and outside, often directly related to residency, is medical assistance. From discussions with various operators, it has become crucially apparent that therapeutic paths started internally need to be continued externally: the interruption of therapeutic plans contributes to creating a strong sense of disorientation in the released individual and, consequently, the failure of programs initiated

by medical services. In most cases, those released do not have contact with territorial health services due to the neglect of the sick person and the lack of resources and projects within the regional healthcare system. There are individuals burdened with significant health problems or uncertified mental disorders who, upon release from detention, do not have access to a structure to receive them and need much time to readjust, unlike those who leave with an already structured therapy from/within the institution and thus are capable of achieving a certain level of independence quickly. These categories of individuals seem to be potential victims of the selection system, as they lack the necessary resources to rehabilitate themselves and cannot demonstrate tenacity, willpower, and credibility.

The territorial offer for people released from prisons relates to opportunities regarding primary needs (food, clothing, shower) and socialization. However, it needs to include the formational-professional aspect of ex-inmates and aspects related to housing, health, and employment (Giorgi, 2017, 83-120).

There are specific projects in Bologna, such as *Dimittendi* and *Together for Work* (in collaboration with the local Catholic archdiocese), which deal with individuals in need of exceptional support (employment) and follow them for six months after their release from institutions, aiming to keep them in the network and support them regarding various needs. The Municipality of Bologna offers an additional service for those needing support in finding employment through the Municipal Employment Office. The service is not a job centre but exclusively focused on career guidance. It can be accessed by individuals residing in the Municipality of Bologna, following a phone call and by appointment only. The office operators conduct individual interviews, supervise or provide assistance in creating a curriculum vitae, offer support for necessary training to acquire valuable skills in job search and help define a professional goal based on personal inclinations, skills, and local job opportunities. In addition to individual meetings, the Assistance Office organizes workshops for those with difficulty using I.T. tools, including facilitating online job searches. Access to these workshops is based on a preliminary evaluation by the operators.

Upon release, the formerly incarcerated individual needs two key elements to be met: moral support and professional guidance. Social workers and local cooperatives strive to create this mediation between the institutionalized environment and the real world of work. Additionally, this recommendation helps prevent the suffering of many failures due to the stigma associated with a criminal past. A successful social assimilation avoids the risk of potential relapses. After years of being confined in prison, the ex-convict no longer possesses the instincts, inspirations, or orientation needed for work. They do not know how to relate to others or convincingly propose themselves for a job, especially given the general economic crisis in Italy. Just as the inmates prepare themselves during detention, they will succeed in coping outside prison. The moral aspect, the faith, is also crucial (Rotaru 2012,5). Those who consider God as a Father do not worry (Mt. 7:7). And how one prepares professionally is also crucial. No one is willing to invest in professional courses for someone who appears "uncertain" and "doubtful". However, morality and professionalism can surpass any limits of prejudice and reservations (Gentile and Sbraccia 2020, 18).

Another ex-convict with a long criminal history behind him believes that a necessary aspect upon release from prison is the desire for change, regardless of the opportunities that may come from the outside. Upon crossing the threshold of imprisonment, each person must question what mindset they should use to take that step. He believes only 5 or 10% break free from criminal inertia (Gentile and Sbraccia 2020, 105). The problem is that most receive assistance in the initial phase, orientation and social integration. However, after the "transition," they enter the autonomy phase, where the mindset and real change are assessed for the better. That person's independence is evaluated by themselves, whether it is beneficial or has criminal tendencies.

All that has been stated so far highlights that, despite the heterogeneity of experiences and regardless of the specific needs of each inmate, what seems to unite many upon release is the need to understand the external reality; those interviewed agree in attributing this task to the prison institution, namely its ability to establish and maintain functional relationships with the outside world. "In this regard, the relationship between the prison and the territory is of fundamental importance, helping to consolidate autonomy projects initiated inside and to prepare for release especially those who come from and risk returning to situations of particular fragility" (Gentile and Sbraccia 2020, 109).

Reintegration: outside walls

Research has been conducted on reentry (recidivism), analyzing primarily the needs and concerns of individuals released from detention. Researchers Baccaro and Mosconi (2002, 69) attempted to establish a different observation point regarding studies on recidivism in the Italian context. They emphasized the degree of social marginalization to which former inmates seem to be relegated. Possible relationships and exchanges occur exclusively between former inmates and convicted offenders, maintaining a clear separation between the prison world and the outside world, even with the territory. Observing the frequencies related to quantitative and qualitative relationships with people, we observe how former inmates are part of a well-structured marginal category and are not integrated into society (Baccaro and Mosconi 2002, 72).

Analyzing the work environment of inmates before entering prison, researchers have identified a high percentage of precarious employment among them, compared to lower estimates of stable regular work and unemployment. In general, there is a low professional profile, emphasizing the poor specialised training of inmates, which, if not supplemented by prison work services, risks being a significant limitation to employment outside. Furthermore, it can be observed how former inmates, once free, pursue the same work activities as before and express a general sense of dissatisfaction (Baccaro and Mosconi 2002, 74). This seems to confirm a behavioral pattern in a situation of non-integration. When they leave prison, they find everything as they left it, which is why they are disappointed. They encounter the same poverty, being forced to behave as they did "before," only with a little more cunning to avoid being detected. In this sense, the question arises: What value can vocational training courses within the prison have, and how effective can they be for actual employment placement (Baccaro and Mosconi 2002, 85)?

It is observed that former inmates face tremendous difficulty once they return to society. The greatest challenge for foreigners regarding their residency permit is that they can only adapt to everyday life with one's residency permit, namely, obtaining employment, social integration, finding housing, and others. Talking about arrests, detention, sentences, and legal procedures is more accessible, codifiable, and socially shareable. However, the same cannot be said for the end of punishment and reintegration concepts. "Just like committing a crime, social reintegration poses a challenge to the established order. It is a journey full of obstacles and opportunities" (Baccaro and Mosconi 2002, 91).

The ISFOL project (2013-2019) - the Institute for the Development of Vocational Training for Workers, is a public research institute supervised by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policies - has developed a Compendium that explains best practices encountered in Italy regarding social reintegration. This project focuses on individuals intersected with various difficulties and discriminations, emphasizing the reintegration of former Romanian inmates with cultural, economic, and social disadvantages. Project managers put themselves in the shoes of individuals who do not have or have lost familiarity over the years with specific social, networking, or purely practical tools (such as internet searches or specific computer systems).

The state is aware of the prejudices and difficulties that former inmates may face, which is why the prison population is considered one of the disadvantaged categories for which a series of facilities are provided. Social cooperatives must have 30% of their employees belonging to these categories. Additionally, the state promotes the establishment of social cooperatives consisting of inmates and former inmates through subsidies in the form of contributions. Lastly, the state supports orientation and training activities for inmates and former inmates in cooperation with the regions within the employment centres (Antigona 2019, 27).

Regardless of the type of services and projects, the risk that should not be assumed is the prolongation of a paternalistic attitude towards these individuals. This is a practice they have become accustomed to inside prison and which tends to continue outside. On the contrary, the attempt should be to provide initial assistance and then move towards progressive accountability. In fact, "While, on the one hand, the community offers numerous opportunities for basic needs (food, clothing, washing) or, more recently, opportunities for socialization, learning, or training, on the other hand, the greatest difficulties are always found in addressing certain indispensable aspects to be able to effectively begin paths to reintegration: housing, health, employment" (Gentile and Sbraccia 2020, 40). The individual must necessarily break free from the mechanism of continuous and constant correction and care.

The involvement of the Church in those who have been released from detention

In Bologna, the Catholic Church is involved in projects of alternative measures to detention, offering job opportunities to those released. One such project is "Fareimpresa" in Dozza (FID), which was born in the prison of the same city. The project has provided jobs for over 50 detainees ("Doing business in Dozza"). It has given horizon to those who had none. The mechanical engineering company FID has allowed detainees to acquire technical skills, work in teams, and relate appropriately to the field of work. It has been and continues to be more than a job opportunity; it is a project that connects the restrictive and free worlds.

The president of FID, Maurizio Marchesini, says that individuals with relatively long sentences can participate. Therefore, they often have benefits and can leave on a semi-liberty regime before their sentence expires. Consistently, between 14 and 15 people work there. Cardinal of Bologna Matteo Zuppi, in the presence of Mauro Palma, the National Guarantor of the Rights of Persons Deprived of Personal Liberty, stated that there are very few initiatives compared to the number of detainees in the current prison system. "There should not be any detainee without their project because, in this way, the prison is only punitive and discriminatory. Civil society must get involved in helping the prison system work better. It is part of a shared responsibility. "With little, we can accomplish much, and everyone must do something" (Berto 2022, 7). Not only inside the prison but also when the inmates are released, because, as the president of FID says, the real difficulties arise when inmates are released, as they find themselves facing the chain of companies, struggling with integration, in a society that changes rapidly and continuously. Additionally, there is the stigma attached to them as former inmates, which often causes them to lose the friendships they had before entering prison, risking finding themselves alone. Despite this, due to job placement, the recidivism rate among those within FID is meagre, at 14%" (Berto 2022, 8).

The CEIS group also contributed to the reduction in recidivism. The Center for Solidarity CEIS, established in Modena in 1982 and later becoming the CEIS ONLUS Foundation, has always coordinated Associations, Cooperatives, and Organisations dealing with the planning, development, and management of socio-educational and socio-sanitary services in the fields of addiction minors, and assistance. CEIS manages over 600 people every day in over 40 residential services, including Italian and foreign minors, people with

mental disorders, people with AIDS, the elderly, people with eating disorders, drug addicts, and others. Through the reception centre "Don Giuseppe Nozzi" in the Corticella area, managed by Catholic priest Giovanni Mengoli (the group's president), many inmates on work permits or former inmates transitioning to freedom are hosted. It is estimated that this hospitality centre, which facilitates the penalty of alternative measures, has reduced the recidivism of incarcerated offenders from 66-70% to 16-18%. More opportunities for similar accommodation-work arrangements (alternative probation) should be created, as this would drastically reduce the costs of maintaining inmates in prisons (by two-thirds) (Berto 2022, 8).

The local church has provided an excellent opportunity for citizens to be released from the "citadel of confinement" (Berto 2022, 8). Journalist Massimo Selleri suggests that the prison in Bologna could judge Italy (Selleri 2022, 4). The Q.N. Society, *Quotidiano Nazionale*, is the brand that identifies a consortium of four daily newspapers led by Monrif Group SpA. It brings together four historic Italian newspapers: *Il Resto del Carlino*, *La Nazione*, *Il Giorno*, and *Il Telegrafo*. Q.N. conducts its production activities within the prison walls, and there is a newly created structure that hosts those who, in the final part of their sentence, can request probation at social services and where they work until their release date. The tutors are retired workers, and this solidarity between generations has impressed Cardinal Matteo Zuppi. "When I saw the relationship between a Tunisian boy and his tutor – the archbishop observes – I understood that this project worked. We must remember that we can do a lot with little and that everyone must do something. We must overcome the logic of throwing away the key" (Selleri 2022, 4).

The tutors are not just professional guides but, in most cases, they are a kind of adoptive parents, moral references, especially for the young ones. Mayor Matteo Lepore appreciates the activity of the Italian Solidarity Center, which hosts foreign inmates in the "Don Giuseppe Nozzi" house, whom the mayor intends to grant honorary citizenship, and their children to acquire *ius soli*. Priest Mengoli argues that involving inmates and granting them civil rights drastically reduces recidivism. The Catholic Archdiocese of Bologna is directly involved, assuming responsibility for eight individuals in a residential setting (Bettazzi and Raimondo 2019, 9).

The Catholic Diocese of Modena, through the association Sant'Annna, and other Italian dioceses urge companies in their pastoral areas to bring more work into prisons. A donation from the archdiocese funded the first twelve months, but the goal is for the cooperative to become sustainable, and for this, more companies are needed. Approximately 550 inmates, including women, are working. They all ask to work, to train, and to have a support point in order to be able to reborn (Rotaru 2016, 29-43).

Conclusions

The Church must collaborate with penal institutions (Rotaru 2017, 57-76), as well as with societies and production cooperatives. It cannot be just one of them. Justice must stand together with the moral aspect of spirituality, as well as with the workforce. If there were only punishment and work, people would not morally recover; they would remain in the closed circle of delinquency, often encouraged by material opportunities and advantages (Mosconi 2001, 3-35). As an Orthodox mission in penitentiaries, we are interested in this mode of serving a sentence in freedom, seeking to understand how we could contribute, together with the offer of local social services, by analyzing the paths of leaving prison, starting from the biographical ones, of those who live or have experienced the restriction of freedom. The Church has the role of helping those who have erred become aware of their criminal deeds and their consequences. The Church promotes and encourages the free reparation of deeds through its chaplains and volunteers.

The mere suffering of the sentence itself is counterproductive; it must be given an expiatory meaning, namely, to deal with the injured party or their family. The fact that the will of the offender to provide reparations to the victim is not cultivated demonstrates a lack of legal common sense and a violated justice; it is a deficiency and a gap in the interest of doctrine and fidelity to the fundamental principles of criminal law strongly urge us to rectify (Parente 2007, 48).

Everything revolves around the offender, with the victim's part missing from the legal equation. When the Church's reparative conscience is absent, the focus is on investing in and recovering the offender, regardless of the individuals who have been offended, the prejudiced groups; justice is not complete. It would be correct for detainees to work, and a portion of their earnings should be allocated to those harmed or prejudiced by them. The Bible conveys this concept of restoring the balance of relationships broken by delinquency, thus corresponding to the intention to restore violated order and to do so in a personalized and humanized manner (Parente 2007, 49). With this statement, we can agree with Ulpianus in the fragment preserved for us at the opening of the Digest: Public law is protected by the sacred, priests, and magistrates (Ulpianus apud Parente 2007, 189).

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