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“1 DECEMBRIE 1918” UNIVERSITY OF ALBA IULIA
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**THE MISSION OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCH IN
PRISONS IN ITALY**

(THESIS ABSTRACT)

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Keywords: penitentiary, inmate, person deprived of liberty, delinquency, perpetrator-victim, rehabilitation, restorative justice, prison ministry, chaplain priest, volunteers, prison officers, moral-religious counselling, social reintegration, future of prisons.

INTRODUCTION

Prison chaplaincy is an important and necessary field in the modern context of the penitentiary system and society. It involves providing spiritual support, counselling, and moral assistance to individuals deprived of their liberty, contributing to rehabilitation and preparation for reintegration into society. The relevance and necessity of this topic relate to the rehabilitation and social reintegration of inmates, who are offered emotional and moral support, helping them find meaning and hope during the time they spend in prison. Inmates often face feelings of guilt, shame, and despair. Spiritual support can motivate them to take responsibility for their actions and begin the process of personal change, which is essential for rehabilitation. By promoting moral and ethical values, prison chaplaincy can help prepare inmates for successful reintegration into the community, thereby reducing the risk of recidivism. Studies show that involvement in religious and spiritual activities can reduce the risk of recidivism. Inmates who receive spiritual support are often more motivated to avoid criminal behaviour after release. Religious communities can offer post-release support, helping former inmates reintegrate into society and avoid returning to old criminal circles.

FRAMING THE THESIS IN A THEMATIC FIELD

The thesis, *The Mission of the Romanian Orthodox Church in Italian Prisons*, was developed within the Doctoral School of Theology at the '1 December 1918' University of Alba Iulia, under the direct supervision of Rev. PhD Professor Mihai Himcinschi, an expert in Orthodox Theology and Missiology. Given the chosen thematic field, missiology, we have selected and addressed the following missionary ideas within the penitentiary context: the phenomenon of criminality in Italy, the mission of our Church in the Italian territory, and the methods of restorative therapy for inmates

through specific pre-spiritual practices and techniques. While these thematic ideas directly pertain to the chosen field, missiology, as critical topics within this area, they also intersect with Spirituality, Art, Psychology, and Patristic Theology. In this sense, one can observe a multidisciplinary approach in the work, which adds depth to the thesis by enriching the ideas that shape a beautiful theology with an empirical and ecclesial character.

THE AIM AND GENERAL OBJECTIVES OF THE THESIS

One of the proposed objectives is to identify pastoral-penitentiary themes and present them within the current Italian context in which they occur and unfold. Another objective is to highlight the contribution of our Orthodox Church and missionary parishes in the rehabilitation of Romanian nationals who have committed offences, sometimes out of ignorance or necessity, and who find themselves in great difficulty. Following this, the aim is to determine how pastoral rehabilitation methods can be concretely adapted and applied to the needs of individuals in Italian incarceration. Lastly, an important objective is revitalising their moral life and social reintegration into family and work.

RESEARCH STATUS

Being a topic of interest, prison ministry and chaplaincy has concerned several Romanian theologians. We refer only to works from the last three years. *Prison Chaplaincy in Romania: A Complex Pastoral Mission* by Adrian Marius Marinescu (2021), published by Presa Universitară Clujeană, explores the role of chaplains in the Romanian penitentiary system and their contribution to the moral and spiritual rehabilitation of inmates. *Pastoral Counselling in the Penitentiary Area* by Alexandru Fleșer (2021), published by the Episcopate of Deva and Hunedoara, focuses on the role of the prison chaplain in the social and moral reintegration of those punished by society with deprivation of liberty. Pastoral care in such an environment must be viewed from three different perspectives: from the perspective of the Romanian Orthodox Church, which can "improve" its pastoral methods by ensuring a pastoral dimension in a "different" context or environment; from the perspective of the incarcerated individuals who feel the effects of imprisonment, needing the restoration of their moral integrity, the development of tolerance and acceptance of others, or the acquisition of new religious knowledge. *Prison Ministry in Romania* by Doru Mihai (2022), published by Editura Universitară, analyses various aspects of prison ministry in Romanian penitentiaries, including the role of priests and chaplains in providing moral and spiritual support to inmates. *Faith Behind Bars: The Impact of Religious Programs on Rehabilitation* by Elena Popescu (2023) is a doctoral thesis completed at the

University of Bucharest, which explores how religious programs, including those led by chaplains, influence the rehabilitation and reintegration of inmates in Romania.

We can mention the recent works on prison chaplaincy outside the country's borders. Virgilio Balducchi's work *Prison Ministry in Italian Prisons: Between Challenges and Hopes* (2023), published by Edizioni Paoline, has appeared in Italy. The author is the national coordinator of prison chaplains and explores the role and impact of prison chaplaincy in Italian prisons. This book addresses a complex and sensitive topic, offering a detailed perspective on the challenges and opportunities associated with pastoral work in the context of the Italian penitentiary system. In the United States, *Prison Ministry in the United States: Challenges and Opportunities* (2022), published by Fortress Press, offers a detailed analysis of pastoral and rehabilitation activities in U.S. prisons. The book explores the challenges prison ministries face, including systemic issues in criminal justice, obstacles in the reintegration of inmates, and the difficulties encountered by chaplains and volunteers working in these environments. In France, *The Pastoral Mission in French Prisons* (2022), published by Bayard Editions, explores pastoral work in French prisons. The author, Olivier Landron, provides a detailed analysis of how Catholics have been involved in the lives of inmates throughout the 20th century and up to the present. In England, *Spiritual Care: The Everyday Work of Chaplains* by Wendy Cadge (2022), published by Oxford University Press, explores the role of chaplains in various sectors, including prisons, and offers a comprehensive view of their daily work and their impact.

We have selected only a few significant works in the field; other works on the topic of prison chaplaincy can be found in the bibliography of our thesis. All these works significantly contribute to understanding and practising pastoral care, including prison ministry. The authors stand out for their deep compassion, intellectual rigour, and commitment to dialogue and reconciliation. Most of these works emphasise empathy, understanding, and the transformative power of faith. Writings on reconciliation, forgiveness, and the dignity of every person are essential, offering a framework for understanding the approach to prison ministry. Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini is an author whom we hold in high regard (even though not contemporary).¹, who greatly influenced prison ministry in Italy and, more broadly, Catholic ministry through his commitment to dialogues with inmates in prisons and his writings addressed to the entire "church from within," emphasising the need for compassion and understanding in serving marginalised and incarcerated individuals. His emphasis on dialogue and listening is particularly relevant to prison chaplaincy, as it embraces and brings forth, through the power of the Risen Christ, the "prodigal sons" into a new life, renewed in an Orthodox manner and socially reintegrated with the added value of experience, which can be a great wealth for a dormant

¹ *La via di Gesù: Conversazioni e meditazioni* (2011), Edizioni San Paolo; *Parlo con il cuore: Testi inediti e riflessioni* (2012), Editura: Piemme; *Conversazioni notturne a Gerusalemme* (2008), Editura: Mondadori.

and indifferent society. His writings on reconciliation, forgiveness, and the dignity of every person provide a framework for understanding his approach to prison ministry. His perspectives inspire chaplains and pastoral workers who strive to bring hope, healing, and dignity to those incarcerated.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Given the interdisciplinary nature of this work, we employed several scientific methods in the research methodology. The primary methodology involved interviews and forms completed according to specific questions related to the ministry of priests and volunteers in prisons in Italy. The interviews were conducted during diocesan, regional, and deanery meetings. Each year, we hosted a guest from Romania who gave lectures in northern and central Italy, during which various topics were clarified and debated. The questionnaires were also distributed to some of the most active and "aware" inmates who were engaged in addressing relevant pastoral issues. In addressing specific topics, we used the inductive method, moving from the particular to the general, and the deductive method, following a logical progression from the general to the particular.

RESEARCH LIMITS

We consulted many books and journals from various penitentiaries and libraries in Rome and borrowed, copied, and scanned numerous articles from newspapers that were no longer circulated. We also borrowed books from different Catholic chaplains and volunteers from associations and cooperatives. However, we did not find a profound theological-pastoral analysis. We needed more Romanian sources to guide me. My time as a parish priest building a church in Fonte Nuova, as well as my role as a counsellor for pastoral issues within EORI and chaplain of two prisons in Rome, along with being a husband and father, did not allow me to cover a bibliography that encompasses all studies in the field, especially from Romania. Additionally, the thesis could have benefited from a comparative approach regarding practices in Italian and Romanian prisons. However, the limitations of the thesis highlight the challenge of continuing research beyond the completion of doctoral studies.

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PRESENTATION OF CHAPTERS

As seen from the table of contents, this work is structured into six chapters. In the first chapter, titled *General Landmarks on Italian Detention*, we presented the complex prison system of various penitentiaries with different security levels. These institutions are meant to ensure not only the custody and safety of inmates but also their rehabilitation and reintegration into society. The Italian prison system is structured into penitentiaries for long-term inmates, preventive detention centres, and special units for juvenile offenders. Each institution has rules and regulations adapted to its specific purposes, whether punitive or rehabilitative. Like other European countries, Italian justice combines modern legal procedures with respect for fundamental human rights. Religious aspects are recognised and respected within the processes, allowing for the free expression of religious beliefs within the bounds of the law. Italian prison legislation protects inmates' religious freedom, including those of the Orthodox faith. Inmates have the right to spiritual assistance and participation in religious rituals as long as these do not interfere with the order and security of the prison. This chapter also

discusses inmates as individuals in confinement and the conditions of restriction and treatment (including health status), foreign inmates in Italy, prison staff, chaplains, volunteers, and prison officers, detailing the identity and role of each.

In the second chapter, we analysed the *Causes of Romanian Delinquency in Italy*. This complex and multidimensional theme required an interdisciplinary approach, using empirical data and relevant theories, offering a rigorous and well-founded analysis, especially from the newspapers and magazines of the time when the events occurred. The historical and social context of Romanian migration to Italy was explored, emphasising the economic and political factors that drove this migration. A detailed approach to the stages of migration and demographic changes was provided, offering a clear understanding of the Romanian community's evolution in Italy and its challenges. The trends of Romanian delinquency, specifically in Italy, were described. Statistics and case studies were used to highlight the delinquent behaviour of Romanians in various geographical and cultural contexts within the Peninsula. The chapter discussed delinquency due to the lack of parental authority and the absence or weakening of parental authority influencing the behaviour of young Romanians in Italy. A deficient school system can fail to provide the necessary resources for the healthy development of young people, leading to marginalisation and antisocial behaviour. Delinquency due to media pressure is another significant factor, in a dual sense, both in terms of exposure to violent content and the labelling of foreign youth, who, being continuously accused of acts they do not feel guilty of, begin to become what they are insinuated to be.

In the third chapter, we analysed the *Forms/Aspects of Psycho-Spiritual Therapy in Italian Prisons*, exploring various therapeutic methods that combine psychological and spiritual dimensions to facilitate the healing and rehabilitation of inmates. The chapter introduces the diversity of therapeutic approaches that integrate these dimensions in the Italian penitentiary environment.

Art therapy integrates artistic expression with inner reflection, helping inmates explore and resolve internal conflicts. Case studies and concrete examples of artistic projects carried out in prisons illustrate the positive impact of this method on the emotional and spiritual well-being of inmates. In some workshops, icons were used as therapeutic tools, highlighting their role in facilitating meditation, prayer, and reconnecting with divine values through painting.

The theatre allowed inmates to explore and express complex emotions, promoting self-discovery and inner healing. Examples of theatrical productions and participant feedback highlighted the benefits of this form of therapy. Reading is a powerful means of reflection and personal growth. Selecting texts with religious content facilitated introspection and the development of a moral and ethical perspective. Studies on the effects of reading in prisons underscored the importance of this type of therapy.

In particular, Dostoevsky's works, with their profound themes of morality, suffering, and redemption, had a significant impact on inmates. Analysing the reactions and changes in beliefs and behaviours of inmates who read Dostoevsky's works provided valuable certification of the transformative power of literature. Autobiographical writing allowed inmates to reflect on their past, recognise mistakes, and envision a different future. Case studies and examples of autobiographies written by inmates illustrated the process of personal transformation and moral reintegration.

Byzantine sacred music, with its power to induce calm and introspection, had profound therapeutic effects. Research and observations on the effects of this music on inmates' emotional and spiritual state highlighted the importance of music therapy. Silent prayer, as a form of meditation and deep connection with oneself and God, facilitated inner healing and the development of an authentic spiritual life, primarily through the group and individual practice of the Jesus Prayer. The testimonies of inmates highlighted the benefits of prayer in the prison context.

In the fourth chapter, titled *Reintegration of Inmates into Church and Society*, we addressed the complexity of inmates' rehabilitation and reintegration process, emphasising the importance of a multidimensional approach. Each section presents essential aspects for the successful reintegration of inmates, from vocational and civic education to the importance of personal motivation and community support. This section highlights the importance of the active involvement of inmates in various religious and productive activities aimed at facilitating their reintegration into the community. Religious services, workshops, and work outside the prison contribute to developing essential practical and moral skills for rehabilitation.

Vocational training and civic education are fundamental for the successful reintegration of inmates. Qualification courses and civic skills development help prepare inmates for life in freedom, providing them with the necessary tools to become productive members of society. Often, the media hurts the public's perception and employers' attitudes towards ex-inmates. Stereotypes and prejudices can significantly hinder their reintegration into the workforce, highlighting the need for awareness and public education campaigns.

Cooperatives and associations play a crucial role in mediating and facilitating the employment of rehabilitated inmates. These organisations can present inmates as qualified and rehabilitated individuals, helping them find jobs and reintegrate socially. Some banks in Italy have decided to conduct financial and vocational education courses for inmates. Training programs in personal finance management, savings, and profitable investments are essential to provide inmates with the necessary skills to manage financially after release.

Motivation and positive thinking are particularly important factors in the success of reintegration. Inmates have learned to transform their suffering into opportunities and to develop a

victorious perspective on their post-detention life. This segment explores the importance of planning and positive thinking in rehabilitation. Restorative justice was also discussed, which offers a constructive approach to serving sentences and allowing inmates to repair social and personal damages to victims. This project emphasises responsibility and reconciliation, contributing to the holistic rehabilitation of inmates.

The chapter also discusses prevention projects involving direct interaction between inmates and students. Inmates share their experiences to discourage delinquent behaviours, and students visit prisons to understand the consequences of antisocial actions. The "open" prison offers a semi-open regime with multiple professional, artistic, and religious opportunities, creating an environment that promotes high ideals and a harmonious life. This approach can reduce the risks of recidivism by encouraging a regular and stable life after release.

In the fifth chapter, we attempted radiography of the Reintegration of Inmates by the Church, addressing a complex and multidimensional theme and highlighting the essential role of the Church in the rehabilitation and reintegration process. The Church's essential role in inmates' reintegration process, both personally and communally, was emphasised. Through biblical and sacramental means, the Church helps inmates reconnect with their authentic selves and reintegrate into the religious community and civil society. It is essential to highlight the spiritual and transformative impact of this process.

This chapter also explores the concept of mercy and its importance in inmate rehabilitation. Without Christian mercy, reintegration efforts can become superficial and lack authenticity. Inmates must learn and practice Christian mercy to transform profoundly and avoid mere sociological formalism.

Inmates' rehabilitation does not end with their release. This section emphasises the need for continued spiritual, psychological, and medical support after leaving prison. The local parish and spiritual father play crucial roles in reorientation and repentance, guiding inmates towards a life based on principles of love and forgiveness, in contrast to the laws of criminality.

From the perspective of Catholic pastoral care, guidelines and pastoral documents guiding chaplains, volunteers, and associations in their work with inmates were presented. These documents provide essential tools for effective and compassion-based pastoral care in the penitentiary environment.

We highlighted the importance of Orthodox values and principles in the reintegration process and the moral support of inmates. Additionally, we presented penitentiary pastoral care from the perspective of the Romanian Orthodox Church, with a general overview and a case study conducted

by Father Alexandru Fleşer, significant and prototypical in the study and presentation of the rehabilitation and reintegration of inmates.

Chapter Six, *God and Those in Prison in the Holy Scriptures*, is a profound theological approach to detention, sin, punishment, and rehabilitation issues. By analysing biblical concepts and comparing them with modern legislation, the work highlights the eternal relevance of scriptural teachings in the contemporary criminal justice context. It is essential to demonstrate how biblical principles of justice, forgiveness, and rehabilitation can be practically applied in today's penitentiary systems to promote inmates' personal transformation and social reintegration.

This chapter provides a detailed analysis of imprisonment and inmates in the Old and New Testaments. Biblical examples of holy figures who experienced incarceration and transformed these experiences into moments of sanctity and liberation offer inspirational models for contemporary inmates. Reflecting on these figures can be a starting point for theological and spiritual discussions in the penitentiary context.

Biblical concepts of sin, punishment, justice, and forgiveness were explored, comparing them with modern legislation in penitentiary administrations and the justice system. The analysis shows how scriptural principles can be integrated into modern systems to promote humane justice focused on rehabilitation and forgiveness. The biblical doctrine of God's justice provides a foundation for restorative justice, emphasising how the guilty can undergo a process of rehabilitation and social reintegration.

By adopting a new, Christ-centered and equitable consciousness, inmates can reintegrate into society and contribute positively, considering the reparation to the injured parties. The figure of the Good Samaritan and the Good Shepherd are strong biblical examples of solidarity and compassion. This section emphasises the need for inmates to acknowledge and take responsibility for their wrongdoing, repent, and show mercy towards those they have offended, preventing the repetition of abuses. Biblical parables and the restorative and compensatory principles of Christ's justice are essential for the rehabilitation of the incarcerated. This aspect highlights the importance of embracing and practising these principles during incarceration and continuing their application in life after release.

CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions discuss the role of the Romanian Orthodox Church in improving the quality of life for Romanian inmates in Italian prisons. The Church helps through educational proposals and mediation between inmates and prison administrations, contributing to their social reintegration. The difficulties faced by Romanians, such as language barriers and lack of family support, which make prison a paradoxical refuge, are highlighted. Romanian parishes provide support through volunteer

work and cultural activities, including art and music therapy. The study emphasises the importance of specialised training for prison staff and the role of cooperatives in offering employment opportunities for the reintegration of inmates. A restorative justice system is promoted, focusing on rehabilitating offenders and repairing damages caused with the help of religious communities. The Bible and Christian values are essential in this endeavour, offering a salvific perspective on guilt, punishment, and forgiveness.

The conclusions also address the future of prisons, highlighting the complexity and controversies related to this and analysing the social, ethical, technological, and political perspectives. The current prison system is considered a "failure," but the abolition of prisons is seen as impossible. Instead, the future could bring major changes.

Furthermore, the impact of Islam on Christianity in the West and the challenges that the Orthodox Church might face, including the integration of Muslims into our Church, are discussed. Examples of interreligious dialogue and common veneration of the Virgin Mary are presented as models for promoting peace and mutual understanding with Islam.

Other topics addressed include secularism, consumerism, and utilitarianism, which profoundly affect society and cause moral-spiritual decay. The Romanian Orthodox Church has a crucial role in maintaining authentic faith in society through the power of parish missions and Orthodox monasticism and in supporting the reintegration of inmates through authentic and sanctifying pastoral care.

In conclusion, we believe that the Romanian Orthodox Church must contribute to the reform of the criminal justice system and the social reintegration of those convicted, offering both spiritual support and positively influencing society's transformation.

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