

## Criminal Justice and the Catholic Church

**Andrew Skotnicki**

Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007 (165 pages)

Working in the criminal justice system and having read many of the writings of Andrew Skotnicki, I approached his new book with a certainty that I would be rewarded with well-researched and eloquent expressions of those things that I already agree to be true about an effective criminal justice system. They are (1) that punishment for crimes is important in both a spiritual and a temporal sense; (2) that prisons are an appropriate ground for punishment while protecting the public from the criminal in the process; and (3) that the essential impetus for reformation comes from the criminal, not from any external influence applied to him.

There are essentially two criminal justice narratives. One issues from the academy and many nonprofit advocacy organizations, is primarily sociological, and rests on the assumption that we need less of everything involved in criminal justice—crimes, arrests, convictions, and prisons. The other is promoted by the practitioners (police, district attorneys, judges, and prison guards) who make the case for strengthening the existing system—more of everything.

Dr. Skotnicki's work, as expected from scholarship based on the universal faith of the Catholic Church and its social teaching principles, bridges those two narratives in a way no other perspective can.

The current environment of much of the professional advocacy class writing and thinking about criminal justice issues—many Catholic writers among them—focused as it is on banning the death penalty and closing prisons, has created a position incompatible with Catholic teaching. Given the difficulty of discovering the Church's teaching concerning these issues, their ideas have stood relatively unchallenged. With the publication of this book and the further attention its influence will bring to the author's other writings, that will no longer be the case.

Skotnicki addresses the controversial issues of punishment and prison from the tradition of the Church. Appropriate penal practices are necessary not only to protect the public from the aggressor but also to allow the criminal the opportunity to reform himself with the aid of his God.

Skotnicki notes, "the prison as we know it in the West originated in the penitential practice of the early church and in primitive monastic communities," and therefore argues, "with some reservations," that "it thus bears a meaning as valid and necessary as penance and monasticism themselves" (6). A significant accomplishment of this book is the explanation of that coherent historical development—infused with spiritual meaning and Catholic teaching—of the appropriate use of the prison.

In a manner that will speak most powerfully to the imprisoned, the book is informed by the criminal and prisoner status of Jesus Christ who allowed himself to become so for the singularly significant reason to affirm his suffering and his immutable bond with humankind.

While Skotnicki's suggestion that "Christ himself is and must be treated as the malefactor" (73) is certainly Church tradition, it would appear more normative that in those horrific cases of offense that repulses even other criminals—thrill murderers, serial rapists, and child molesters—the malefactor we are dealing with is the Devil, with whom an evil partnership has been formed quite beyond that mundane pact with the criminal world made by the professional and habitual criminal largely motivated by economic gain.

The professional criminal who commits crimes for money, though doing everything in his power to avoid being caught and brought to justice, generally understands and accepts the sanctions imposed for crimes, particularly if he has committed many besides those for which he was apprehended.

Considering the importance Christ placed on criminals, the works of the early and medieval Church fathers, and Pope Pius XII's statements on crime and punishment in the mid-twentieth century, the lack of substantial comment in recent years is striking, as it corresponds with the period of the most massive incarceration in human history.

The Jubilee Year report from the American bishops, *Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice* (2000), though welcome as an attempted resumption of the conversation, was more reflective of a certain political stance than a solid Catholic construction around criminal justice issues.

With the publication of Skotnicki's deeply spiritual and intellectually satisfying book, this brief Catholic silence about criminal justice has ended, and we will hope to see much more thought being focused on this most Catholic of issues.

—David H. Lukenbill (e-mail: [Dlukenbill@msn.com](mailto:Dlukenbill@msn.com))  
*LampStand Foundation, Sacramento, California*