

Joseph House helps former inmates find true and lasting freedom

An interview with Fr. Dustin Feddon,
Executive Director of Joseph House

By NBCC Staff

Mass incarceration is defined as “comparatively and historically extreme rates of imprisonment and by the concentration of imprisonment among young, African American men living in neighborhoods of concentrated disadvantage.”¹ A problem as complex as mass incarceration, with roots that reach back to the slave ships unloading human cargo along the coasts of Africa, may seem overwhelming and unsolvable, but Fr. Dustin Feddon tackles the issue one person at a time.



Fr. Dustin Feddon also serves in pastoral ministry to those incarcerated throughout North Florida. In his work among the incarcerated he focuses especially on the needs of those in solitary confinement.

Fr. Dustin Feddon, of the Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee, sees mass incarceration as an extension of the infrastructure of inequality—a belief in the fundamental differences between blacks and whites—that allowed systems such as slavery, Black Codes, Jim Crow laws, and segregation to exist. The greatest residual impact of this inequality is seen in the south, and Florida has the distinction of possessing the highest incarceration rate² of any other state (or country), with a total prison population of over 100,000 men and women, and “more juveniles in adult prisons than any other state”, according to the Joseph House website. Of those 100,000 men and women, 95% will be released...and statistically, “two-thirds will return to prison within three years” without intervention (<https://josephouseus.org>).

Which is why Joseph House was created.

The name is based upon the biblical story of Joseph, the son of Jacob, as told in the book of Genesis (chapters 37-50). Captured by his brothers, Joseph was sold into slavery, eventually became the overseer of a wealthy household, was imprisoned through another’s deceit, became the advisor to the Pharaoh of Egypt, and saved his family (including his brothers) from famine. This story proves the power of God’s redemptive love and how He affords us rescue from overwhelming circumstances—similar to those faced by the newly-released inmates Joseph House serves.

Fr. Feddon noted that he was consistently “seeing a lot of young Black faces” as he served the inmates in Florida through prison ministry, particularly those being held in solitary confinement. He mentioned

¹ (Wildeman, 2012)

² (Incarceration in Florida, 2019)

that statistically, 90 to 95% of prison inmates come from poverty, and this is a commonality to people of color. Without the means to attain education, adequate housing, food, vehicles, etc., many resort to illegal means to secure these necessities. In addition, families in poverty perpetuate that cycle with prison or jail sentences as likely outcomes.

Plans are in place to enlarge the capacity of Joseph House to accommodate five to six former inmates, but it currently offers a safe space for two residents to experience a positive “family” community for the three to six months they stay. During that time they receive therapy and counseling for the trauma they have experienced during their incarceration and throughout their lives, to help them make sense of and overcome the trials they have faced. They are given the resources they need to successfully reintegrate into society, if that is a realistic path for them, and one of the resources is developing relationships...not an easy thing for some who have experienced social deprivation for months or years on end.

“The power of just mercy is that it belongs to the undeserving. It’s when mercy is least expected that it’s most potent—strong enough to break the cycle of victimization and victimhood, retribution and suffering. It has the power to heal the psychic harm and injuries that lead to aggression and violence, abuse of power, mass incarceration.”

— **Bryan Stevenson, Founder and Executive Director of Equal Justice Initiative, from Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption**

Using volunteers as role models and guides, Fr. Feddon stated, the former inmates are taught “to network to gain social capital” as they secure good quality jobs using connections they’ve formed with community leaders. He went on to say that the Catholic Church “is in a position to provide an antidote”, giving these supports through the community found within parishes and dioceses—especially in light of the Church’s teaching on repentance and forgiveness. “I’m not absolving prisoners of their crimes without contrition, but I do believe we must work towards their reconciliation and reintegration because this is how God has loved us. Remember: while we were sinners Christ died for us.”

Although unique in its approach to rehabilitation by framing mass incarceration as a historical issue with detrimental impacts on people of color in present day, Fr. Feddon believes the blueprint Joseph House uses is in place in other areas and can certainly be successful in many others. He does, however, give much credit to Bishop William Wack, C.S.C., as leader of the Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee, citing Wack’s commitment to prison ministry as a great boon that was partially responsible for the speed with which Joseph House was able to secure a building and begin ministering to released inmates.

Joseph House recently began hosting its first resident, Joe Sullivan, a client of Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), an organization devoted to righting unjust prison sentences. Sullivan was given life without parole in 1989 for a non-homicide crime he committed at 13 years of age. Although he grew up in prison, Sullivan, now 43, is now part of the Joseph House community—a community focused on meeting his

needs as he prepares to transition back into society—which provides his lodging, meals, and transportation, in addition to guidance with networking and relationships throughout his stay.

When asked about the highs and lows of his current ministry, Fr. Feddon paused briefly: “Going into the community, asking for help, became disheartening. So many times, I was told ‘no’, then a total stranger would come in a moment of great need and provide without any questions asked!” To illustrate, Fr. Feddon told of how he tried to find an apartment for a former inmate, and everyone he spoke to was unwilling to take a chance on this man. Finally, one apartment manager who initially declined to help, called back after giving it more thought, having decided to take a risk and make a connection: “He realized he was in a position to make an impact on this man by giving him a chance.” And isn’t that what we, as Catholics, are called to do?

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How can you become involved in prison ministry?

The NBCC asked Fr. Feddon how a parish team could begin a prison ministry program, and he responded to the following questions:

- 1) If this is to be a parish sponsored program, would permission have to be given by the diocesan bishop?
Yes, for any parish to begin this type of ministry it is first important to receive the blessing of the Bishop.
- 2) How would a committee approach a prison to begin ministering to the inmates?
The first step in approaching a prison or jail for ministry is to contact the chaplain. The chaplain will then direct you from there. Prisons differ state to state in their various rules when it comes to ministry, so the best thing to do is to ask the chaplain or whoever is in charge of ministries and services to help you get started.
- 3) What are some things that you think would be helpful for people to know as they begin prison ministry?
The first thing to know is this is sacred ministry where we are invited to minister and accompany those who are the lowest and poorest among us. Prison ministry is an opportunity to fulfill Christ's command to visit those imprisoned. It's also important to note that prison ministry is not about reforming prisoners nor changing their lives. If that is our approach we will fail and it will be miserable for all involved. Prison ministry is about us becoming the presence and light of Christ to those in isolation. It's also about us being open to the profound reality that often those whom we serve will minister to us. When we enter into greater proximity with those in prison, our lives will change and we will encounter God's mercy and justice in new ways. That is, if we're open to listening to those we encounter in these spaces. To be effective in these spaces of ministry, humility is essential. We have much to learn from those who are most marginalized in our society. For me, Michael, Tavares, Andre, Sederick,

Joe [inmates Fr. Feddon has ministered to] and many others are my greatest teachers in this ministry.

- 4) Would prison ministers be allowed to bring in Bibles, study guides, etc.?
Often you can bring in study guides and items pertinent to the ministry, but usually, you can't bring in gifts for prisoners, however, you can as an organization donate items to the chapel through the mail.