

**Jens Soering's recorded remarks for Lenten Program at Sacred Heart Church Camden NJ  
Feb 22, 2013**

Thank you very much for giving me this opportunity to address you. I understand that crime and punishment, public safety and prison policy are sensitive and emotional issues for all of you. So I am especially grateful that you are giving me, a prisoner, a chance to speak to your concerns, which are also mine. This is very courageous of you, and I appreciate your openness, the wideness of your hearts.

In preparation for this address, I asked for questions that I might try to answer. But unfortunately specific questions were not forthcoming. Instead, folks seemed to be overwhelmed by the enormity of the problem and by their feelings of helplessness. I think those reactions are understandable; in fact, I often feel overwhelmed and helpless myself. So I want to devote this address to these feelings and to the fundamental question, "What, if anything, can I do?"

It strikes me that many, perhaps most of the problems facing all of us today are so enormous that we feel overwhelmed and helpless. The US budget deficit is in the trillions, global warming is sending unprecedented hurricanes into densely populated cities, and every week, it seems, another mentally ill person shoots up another school or shopping center. Is it any wonder that hope seems out of reach?

I struggle with despair myself – what prisoner does not? But I also see feelings of hopelessness as profoundly misleading, and I would like to tell you why.

One of the most important roles any of us can play, especially in dark and evil days like these, is to be a witness to the truth. This means standing up for what is good and true, even if in this generation we have no chance of overcoming the evil and the untrue. Because there will be a generation after us, and they will need us to show them the truth, so they will have a beacon by which they can orient themselves. In other words, we have a duty to our children and our children's children.

This idea of being a witness to the truth is especially meaningful to me, as a German, because my country went through much darker days than these as recently as 70 years ago, during the Nazi era. But even in those times, men and women witnessed to the truth, although they had no reason to believe they could change the regime. I speak of men like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and women like Sophie Scholl. When the Nazis were finally defeated, the memory of these heroic people helped show their children's and their children's children's generations how to lead better lives.

So what I want to suggest to you is that your feelings of being overwhelmed and hopeless, while understandable, are not relevant. You, individually, do not have to succeed in overthrowing the prison-industrial complex, an industry worth \$65 to \$70 billion per year. You cannot win, and you do not need to win. You just need to keep the flame of truth alive and, if possible, to help it spread, little by little. Because, of course, that flame of truth will win in the end. The lie is always defeated. It just takes a lot longer to defeat it than any of us would wish.

So, to answer the fundamental question, "What, if anything, can I do?" I suggest you start by spreading the gospel, as it were. That is the first and most important duty of Christians and of prison reformers. How can the heathen believe if you have not first preached the word to them? The fact is that most people are almost completely unaware that current criminal justice policies are profoundly un-Christian and un-American. So there is a crying, desperate need to educate people!

You have actually made a great start simply by holding this event. What I am telling you is that holding more and more events like these is the best way to prepare the ground for the change that needs to come. You are laying the foundation on which your children and your children's children can re-build this broken society.

This is what I have tried to do myself, by writing books like the one you are studying today. My goal has been to provide folks like you with a variety of different tools to educate others. As the Apostle Paul

said, you have to be all things to all men – you have to use different approaches for different target audiences.

One of my books is meant to appeal to fiscal conservatives, people who care about government waste and balancing budgets. Another of my books is meant to appeal to Christians who operate primarily on an emotional level. Another of my books is meant to appeal to intellectual Christians – it even comes with a six-week course for groups! And another of my books is meant to appeal to readers who just like a good story. My point here is not to toot my own horn but to offer you a toolbox, a set of different approaches for persuading people, so you can choose the one that suits you and your target audience the best.

Of course you should not use my books alone. I can recommend two others warmly – *Lockdown America*, by Christian Parenti, and *The New Jim Crow*, by Michelle Alexander. The first gives the history and political ramifications of the so-called “war on crime,” the second deals with institutional racism and the “war on drugs.” Again: You need to use the approach that works best for the folks you are trying to reach.

Beyond educating others, there are more things you can do to make real changes. But to do that, you first have to educate yourself about the true nature of the beast, so you can figure out the best way to attack it. The key idea here is this: Prison is not really about crime control or justice or any of the other platitudes spouted by “law and order”-politicians. You can protect the innocent and honor the victims of crime at far, far lower levels of incarceration. So why build and maintain so many prisons? Money! Prisons are the perfect recession-proof business. All the other stuff – law and order, public safety, victims’ rights – that’s just marketing, the advertising slogans that ensure the money keeps rolling in.

This is a difficult concept to absorb, because we have all been trained to think that the purpose of prisons is to punish the guilty and protect the innocent. To overcome these preconceptions, to open your eyes, I strongly urge you to read Chapter 6 of my fourth book, *The Church of the Second Chance – A Faith-based Approach to Prison Reform*, which was also published as an article by *Prison Magazine* entitled “Correctional Capitalism in the Land of the Free.” You can find this article on the “Articles” page of my Website. There are a great many excellent articles, studies and even books about the prison-industrial complex, the business of caging human beings for profit. But to the best of my knowledge, this article is the only overview of all aspects of the phenomenon, thus providing you with a frame of reference for all the other articles, etc.

Once you have developed an understanding of the financial motives and pressures behind the correctional industry, you can plan your attack so you’ll hit them where it really counts: in their wallets, in their bank accounts. This is, in fact, a profoundly Christian thing to do! Two thousand years ago, the Great Temple in Jerusalem was a bit like the prison-industrial complex today. Both are or were government boondoggles – pointless wastes of money that allow the elite to get rich, while poor people suffer. Jesus understood this, which is why he went into the Temple and overturned the moneychangers’ tables. He recognized that the Great Temple was just a racket. And, if you recall, it was right after Jesus overthrew the moneychangers’ tables that the priests started plotting to kill him.

Well, the prison-industrial complex is no different. So I encourage you to follow Jesus’ footsteps, buy a few shares of Correctional Corporation of America, attend the shareholders’ meetings, and ask the “great priests” in charge some really uncomfortable questions.

And remember: You do not have to “win,” you do not need to “succeed.” You just have to witness to the truth and keep the flame alive for those who follow, for those who depend on you to teach them and to light the way. It is the voice crying in the wilderness that survives the age, while of merchants of misery and fear and death are forgotten.