

JASPER SPICERO

LIVING WATERWAY

Here follows an extract from a report on prisons from 1839. This document has since been largely circulated amongst Western statesmen who developed the modern penal system.

The report analysed the organisation of dozens of prisons across Europe to define a model for the construction of new ones. It concluded that one prison stood out as the precedent to be followed: it was a prison for children.

The building was built by the church in 1703 for children who were too disruptive to be in society but too innocent to be left to die in the hell of the gaols. Their souls could be straightened with a 'house of correction', a hybrid between a prison, a boarding school, a factory and a church.

The report by the French government included the official description of the house of correction as formulated by the Pope.

- Octave Perrault, Los Angeles, 2017

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Report to M. the Count of Montalivet, lord of France, Home Secretary, on prisons, houses of force, houses of correction and penal colonies. Paris, the 1st of January 1839.

Translation of the rule of the House of Correction of San Michele in Rome, as it was formulated by the Pope Clément XIth in 1703 and 1735, and reported to the Secretary of State Bernard-Benoît Remacle by M. the Count of Montalivet, Lord of France, then Home Secretary.

I have already talked to Your Excellency about this prison, at the beginning of my report. This prison isn't remarkable because of its current administration; but it is the first penal colony that was constructed in the world after this new model, and according to a system that Americans are only imitating.

It was intended at first as a house of correction for young convicts and indeed held them for about 60 to 80 years. I do not know the precise date when it was devoted to women convicts; but i've been fortunate to find a small brochure, published in 1779, by a bishop at Saint-Michel, and I have extracted the chapter about this part of the institution. At this time, it was still hosting young convicts, as its founder wanted.

I translate.

On the rules of the house of correction

"His Holiness Clément XI, considering that the great work of the apostolic hospice missed a place where to put the young boys of mean nature, and guilty of some offence, took the laudable resolution to join, to the building finished under Innocent XII, the other part, so-called of correction, under the protection and the direction, whether spiritual or temporal and financial, of the eminent cardinals surveyors of the hospice themselves, in order to be so united and incorporated, that it make a single body with the institution."

"In this house of correction, that doesn't contain anything but the convenient house of the prior and three guards, there is a large hall with three storeys on either side, 60 small rooms or gaols, all separated from one another, and each of them with its own door and small grilled window. The poor fathers that have the misfortune to have indocile sons can send them, with the authorisation of the cardinal protector, the payment of a daily coin for their food, and get them confined until the moment when, through the admonitions and exhortations from the father of the pious school and other religious fathers or from the prior himself, and through means such as the punishment with the whip (in moderation) and of only bread and water (for a few days) they resign themselves to become good christians, to be obedient towards their parents. The same treatment occurs also for the pupils of San Michele, in the event of a significant breach."

"A prison of this kind must serve as a place of punishment for these young people who, for their crimes, are convicted by the courts to the galleys; but who, due to their age and their place, are not likely to receive such a sentence. In this case, the apostolic chamber is forced to pay only a half-coin per day, because the labour of these children is a profit to the pious place of San Michele. This work consists of spinning wool during the working days to make wool pieces, under the continuous surveillance of three guards and the prior. All have their feet chained, attached to the beam, where they stay ordered in the great hall, surrounded by the cells; and, for each of them, the rules imposed by their respective courts must strictly be observed."

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"Once the work has been finished, they are led one by one by the guards to their cells, without them ever having the capacity to communicate with the convicts of correction (the children consigned by their fathers), so that they won't be misled or learn new vices."

"Those, then, that are locked in with the sole purpose to correct themselves, stay with their own clothe, and do not exit the cell ever, so long as they haven't finished their punishment; they are, consequently, freed from work, since it is only ordered to convicts through a court's sentence. The others are handed a woolen hood in winter, like the galley slaves; and, in summer, a jacket of black cloth, in addition to the shirt, the underpants, the stockings and slippers; all things that the house provides them."

"The fathers of the pious schools must teach to all of them the christian doctrine, to give them useful and pious lectures, to hear them confess once a month, to administer them the Holy-Eucharist at Easter and in event of disability."

"In addition, a wise and respectable priest, in possession of a prior's title, who celebrates the holy mass every morning, is their direct superior. This clergyman has the power to order, at his own discretion, the quality and the measure of the punishment when there is a breach of discipline in the room of correction."

"To that end, there are three other guards to correct them as well as to force them to fulfil their duties."

"Their usual food is of two and a half bread for one whole day; their bread is darker than that of the other parts of the community; two glasses of wine for one whole day; in the morning a soup with the only portion of three ounces of meat on fatty days, of fish on lean days ; in the evenings of friday, saturday and all days of fast, they are given fresh or dry fruits, depending on the season, at the amount of half a pound (6 ounces) for each."

This precious chapter sufficiently shows, I believe, that the correctional system in use today across many countries had been in practice for a long time in Rome. Apart from the irons at their feet that unnecessarily loaded the legs of the young convicts, isn't it similar to the system of Philadelphia where the convicts are locked in their cells and the system of Auburn where they are submitted to silence and communal labour?

