

BELONGING IN A CHURCH COMMUNITY, A RESOURCE FOR PEOPLE DETAINED

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Abstract: This article proposes an investigation into how religiosity and religious activity carried out in the penitentiary by the church community to which it belongs represent a point of support during detention and become a resource in the implementation of detainees' post-detention plans. Given the restrictions and lack of activities in prisons, should we ask ourselves the legitimate question of whether the church community is a point of support for the person deprived of liberty during detention? And can the church community of affiliation become a resource in the realization of post-detention plans for detainees?

Restrictions and lack of prison activities have been associated with depression and apathy among inmates, as well as creating difficulties in reintegrating into disadvantaged communities (Curran and Wilkinson, 2010; Whiteford, 1997, 2000). Increasing the quality and number of relationships can alleviate the potential for health problems and prevent depression (Faust et al., 1985), social anxiety (La Greca and Lopez, 1998), feeling lonely, empty interrelational and suicidal ideation (Bonanno & Hymel, 2010; Plămădeală V., 2018; Bonanno & Hymel, 2010; Erskine, 1995). Programs created in order to improve living and professional skills allow the development of functional roles and routines, as well as the development of pro-social behavior (Burtz, 2010).

The results of this research show that most detainees believe that religion will help them in social reintegration, and the importance given to religious participation after incarceration is significantly higher compared to the time before incarceration. The main social factors perceived by the detainees as impediments in the process of integration into society are: the rejection based on the labeling made by state institutions, poverty, the lack of a home, which increase the risk of recidivism. The success of the social adaptation of liberated persons, to a large extent, depends on the social entourage in which they will happen to return after the liberation, ie on those groups in which they will have to fulfill their social roles and functions.

Keywords: social relations, support, recidivism, community, integration

Introduction

Taking as a starting point the negative effects that occur on the psyche of the person serving a custodial sentence, through restrictions and a lack of prison activities that have been associated with depression and apathy among prisoners, as well as difficulties regarding the reintegration into disadvantaged communities (Curran and Wilkinson, 2010; Whiteford, 1997, 2000), relational needs are essential elements that raise the quality of life and present a sense of personal interrelationship. The continuous absence of relational needs can manifest as frustration, aggression or anger (Erskine, 1995). Increasing the quality and number of relationships can alleviate the potential for health problems and prevent depression (Faust et al., 1985), social anxiety (La Greca & Lopez, 1998), feeling lonely, empty interrelational and suicidal thoughts (Bonanno & Hymel, 2010; Plămădeală V., 2018; Bonanno & Hymel, 2010; Erskine, 1995).

Programs created to improve living and professional skills may allow the development of functional roles and routines, as well as the development of pro-social behavior (Burtz, 2010). David Thornton believes that there is a connection between

criminal behavior and the moral stage in which the person is. He believes that certain groups – such as family, school, prison etc. – can develop a moral atmosphere apart from the moral stage in which the members are. Religious interventions are integral in all actions aimed at reintegrating the person deprived of liberty in the society, by restoring its value, developing feelings of empathy and social relationships.

An important role in establishing a spiritual balance of the former convict can be constituted by the effective and affective involvement of the institution of the Church. The involvement of this institution must take place both for the released person and at their family, friends, those who can participate and emotionally help them during the critical period. Religious intervention is the factor that can create a soul connection between the individual in difficulty and those around him, it can help him know himself better, recognize his mistakes and be involved in his own process of re-education and social reintegration.

Regarding the detainees, it has been shown that maintaining a close relationship with family members has the following benefits: a better adaptation to the penitentiary environment, a good collaboration with the staff, a low risk of suicide (Geller et al., 2009). Volunteers and missionaries who carry out moral-religious activities with those deprived of liberty, in collaboration with the chaplain of the penitentiary unit and other chaplains representing other religious denominations, truly help the whole process of preparation for liberation, by maintaining a close connection with the family of the convict and through the moral and material support it provides.

Theoretical Approaches

The deprivation of liberty leads to a change in the mental state and personality of those imprisoned. Prison implies a totality of norms, values and customs. Over time, most detainees adapt to the penitentiary environment, they become, without their will, passive to the things that happen around them, permanently being in a state of adaptation. Restrictions and lack of prison activities have been associated with depression and apathy among inmates, as well as difficulties in reintegrating into disadvantaged communities (Curran & Wilkinson, 2010; Whiteford, 1997, 2000). In this context, relational needs are essential elements that increase the quality of life and have a sense of personal interrelationship. The continuous absence of relational needs can manifest as frustration, aggression or anger (Erskine, 1995).

Social maturation occurs in the interpersonal relationships of the individual, it develops with its capacity for self-regulation, social interaction. Increasing the quality and number of relationships can alleviate the potential for health problems and prevent depression (Faust et al., 1985), social anxiety (La Greca & Lopez, 1998), feelings of loneliness and suicidal ideas (Bonanno & Hymel, 2010; Plămădeală V., 2018; Bonanno & Hymel, 2010; Erskine, 1995).

Those deprived of liberty who have obtained in the penitentiary a moral and psychological training necessary for the post-release period and have not lost their

social relations with society can return quite quickly and successfully to useful activities, they can enroll in the new environment, assimilating new social roles. Religious interventions are integral in all actions aimed at reintegrating the person deprived of liberty into society. Life improving programs and professional skills allow the development of functional roles and routines, as well as the development of pro-social behavior (Burtz, 2010). Therefore, the success of the social adaptation of the liberated persons will depend, to a large extent, on the social entourage they will reach after the liberation, ie on those groups in which they will have to fulfill their social roles and functions.

According to a survey (2019) conducted by the National Administration of Penitentiaries (ANP), at the system level, the percentage of recidivists in the general prison population was, in the last 10 years, between a minimum of 38.27% (in 2016) and a maximum of 45.78% (in 2012 and 2013). In 2018, the share of repeat offenders in the general prison population was that of 38.44%. Recidivism is worryingly high, many, serving life sentences, committing new crimes after release. It is not enough that those who have committed crimes and have been, for a period of time, taken from society and placed in prison want to return, as changed and assumed people; the community also plays an extremely important role in the reintegration of these people, the set of attitudes, the social reception of crime also has its say.

The attitude that society has towards these people is a factor of major importance in their successful reintegration or in the failure of a reintegration and in committing new crimes. The company requires only a certain control over the adaptation process and the provision of the necessary help to overcome the difficulties that may arise in the employment process or in solving housing problems, as well as in establishing relations with the close social entourage. Belovics Ervin (2008) argued that the recognition of the rights of convicts is a primary *sine qua non* condition, being the starting point of any action that wants to obtain the resocialization of the person concerned.

According to László Kóhalmi (2008), an important role in the convict's chances of resocialization consists in the detainee's right to maintain ties with the outside world. With regard to detainees, it has been shown that maintaining a close relationship with family members has the following benefits: a better adaptation to the penitentiary environment, a good collaboration with the staff, a lower risk of suicide (Geller et al., 2009). The family in difficulty, due to the lack of an important member within it, can be helped by the church community of affiliation, also through moral and material support. The help offered by the church community of affiliation offers peace to the closed one, the attention being directed on the correction of the deviant behavior.

Going out into society again, after a shorter or a longer period of time, the former detainees face difficulties in finding employment and in finding a home. The intervention of the church community to which they belong is important in supporting them, in order to find a job, a house, and in this way the possibilities of a recidivism decrease considerably. Marriage to a member of the same church community is an element to consider, Warr (1998) suggesting that a marriage reduces the amount of time a person spends with people of the same sex, thus limiting opportunities for crime and the

influence of others to such behavior. When a person is married, they tend to be more closely related to family obligations.

Given that the general attitude of society is hostile to those who have committed an act under criminal law and have been sentenced to imprisonment, according to the work of Easton (2011), which shows that contemporary society develops hostile attitudes and also a considerable lack of sympathy for criminals, compared to 20 years ago, and the results of Muraru's (2013) research, which indicated a significant, weak and negative relationship between morality and attitude towards criminals, research conducted per 120 subjects (adolescents and adults), religion is a robust variable that tends to be associated with a reduced likelihood of crime, delinquency or recidivism.

Religious interventions are integral to all actions aimed at reintegrating the person deprived of liberty into society, by restoring its values, by developing feelings of empathy and social relations. The penitentiary unit falls into the category of groups identified by David Thornton as conducive to developing a moral atmosphere independent of the moral stage in which members are found, along with family and school, through religious interventions of the church community, volunteers and missionaries who carry out activities, together with the chaplain of the penitentiary unit, help to maintain social ties with the outside world, developing positive relationships to achieve post-detention plans and objectives.

Methodology

The main goal of my research was to investigate how religion and religious activities carried out in the penitentiary by the church community are a point of support during detention and a resource in the implementation of post-detention plans for detainees. In order to do so, I asked the following two research questions: *Is the church community a point of support for the person deprived of liberty during detention? Can the church community become a resource in carrying out post-detention plans for detainees?*

The hypothesis for this research aims to confirm or refute the fact that detainees who participate in moral-religious activities in prisons benefit from the help of the church community and develop positive relationships to achieve plans and objectives after leaving detention.

Regarding the research area, I turned my attention to a specific segment of the population, namely the detainees from the Gherla Maximum Security Penitentiary. The group of subjects up for analysis consists in the male convicts of various religious denominations in the Gherla Penitentiary, respectively 100 persons deprived of liberty. We did not investigate people in pre-trial detention, as until the date of conviction, they benefit from the presumption of innocence.

The main information gathering technique was the questionnaire, one of the richest sources of information, which was developed in accordance with the research objectives, research questions and research hypotheses. From the questionnaire created for the research on the contribution of religious assistance to the reintegration process

of persons deprived of liberty in the Gherla Penitentiary, which includes 24 questions, we extracted 7 questions that are relevant to this research, all these questions being closed ones, with variants of default answer from which the respondent can choose one or more answer options. Also, a large part of the questions contains the answer option "other", leaving the respondents the opportunity to formulate an answer themselves according to their options. The questionnaires were applied between May and June of 2019, in the Gherla Penitentiary. The detainees were told: the reasons for being included in the investigation; a brief description of the research; the existence of anonymity and confidentiality of the collected data and the establishment of the coordinates in which the completion of the questionnaire will take place. For those who had difficulty reading and writing, the role of the operator fell to a colleague in the detention room who can read and write and who knows the detainee better, with whom he communicates more easily.

Once the questionnaires were completed, they were numbered from 1 to 100 and the construction of the database in the SPSS computer program together with the *Excel* software started. After completing this stage, we proceeded to the stage of statistical processing, respectively to the construction of tables and the generation of graphs useful in interpreting data, and then in formulating conclusions.

Results

The results focus on how religion and religious activities are a fulcrum during detention and become a resource in the implementation of detainees' post-detention plans. To the question regarding the importance given to the different aspects of the religious life in the period before the imprisonment in the penitentiary, the answers are dispersed on the whole spectrum of the scale we used. However, the degree of religious activism of detainees seems surprising in some places, but this is probably explained by the fact that a significant number of them (34%) come from rural areas, places where the participation in various forms of religious life is quite common (explanation: *Chart 1*).

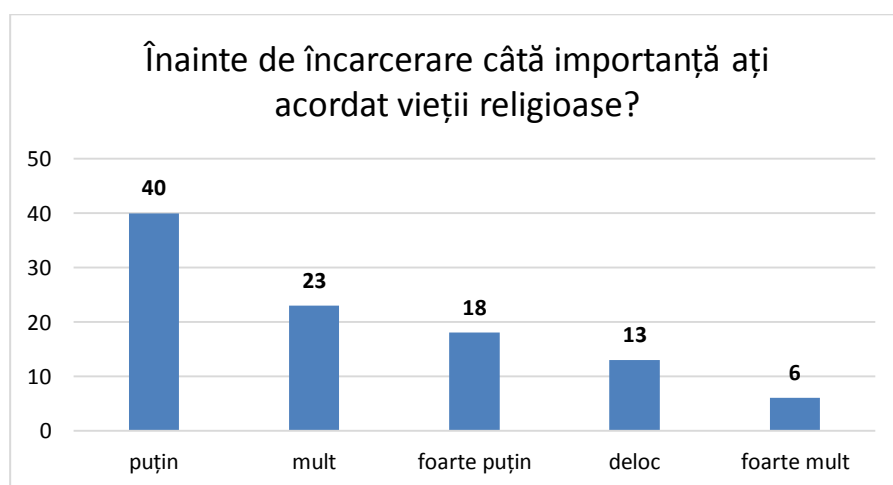


Chart 1:

How much of an importance did you pay to a religious lifestyle before incarceration?

(Little, much, very little, none at all, very much)

The question aims to observe the importance given by detainees after incarceration; it reveals some changes in religious behavior as opposed to when they benefited from the state of freedom. We will insist on the differences between the

two periods (pre and post-incarceration). Regarding the religiosity and the interest for the moral-religious activities carried out in the detention unit of the persons deprived of liberty, they show a high and very high degree of involvement in the spiritual life (73%), compared to the period before incarceration. This increase is explained by the fact that the moral-religious activity carried out in the penitentiary offers a more direct and personal way of communication with the Divinity, as we tend to appeal to the supernatural in the most difficult moments of our life. Also, the activities carried out by the cults in the penitentiary and volunteers by offering different material goods can represent a possible reason for an intensification of their participation in the moral-religious activities in the penitentiary (explanation: **Chart 2**).

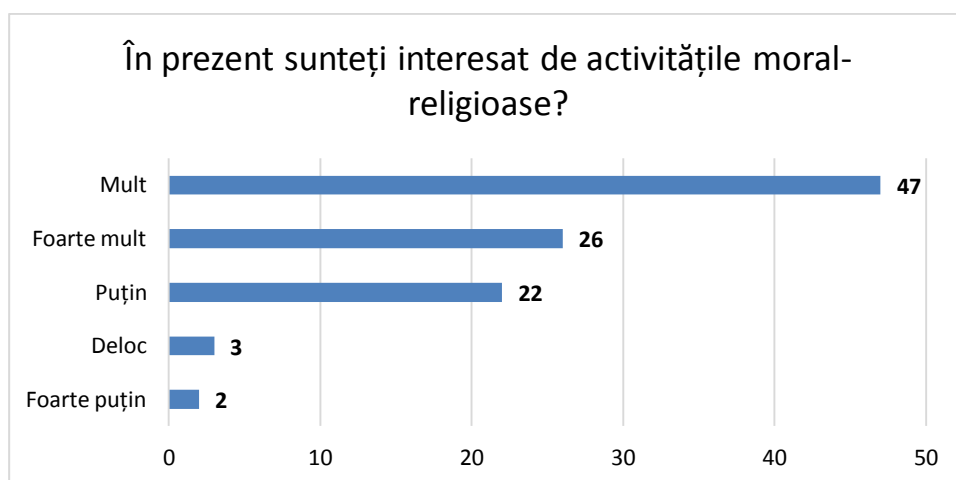


Chart 2.

How much are you currently interested in moral and religious activities?

Starting from the fact that the participation in the moral-religious activities in the penitentiary is much higher than in the pre-incarceration period, the activities carried out by the cults and volunteers represent a point of support for those deprived of liberty. We find that 81.8% of the respondents assimilate positive effects together with the participation in the moral-religious activities. The missionary priests and volunteers who work in the detention unit strongly support the reintegration process through the moral and material contributions they bring. Those deprived of liberty who have obtained in the penitentiary a moral and psychological training necessary for the post-release period and have not lost social relations with society can return quite quickly and successfully to the new environment, and they can also assimilate new social roles (explanation: **Chart 3**).

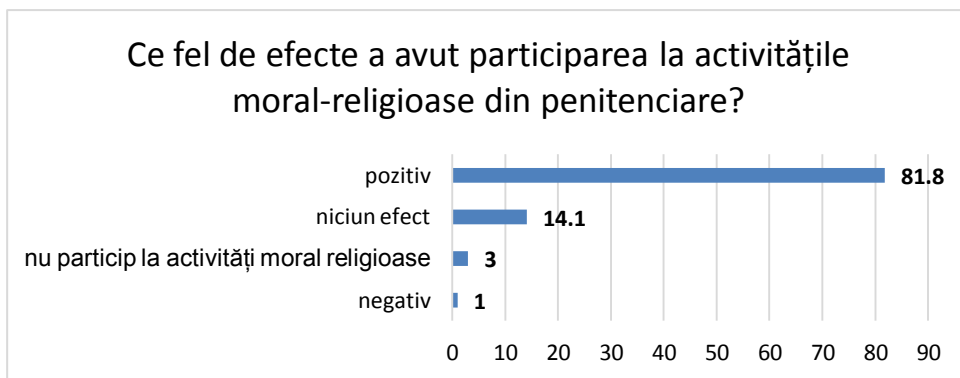


Chart 3.

What kind of effects has taking part in moral and religious activities in prison have on you?

The success of the social adaptation of the liberated persons depends on the social entourage in which they will reach after the liberation, ie on those groups in which they will have to fulfill their social roles and functions. Churches and religious organizations are some of the few institutions that remain in close proximity to most people deprived of their liberty and also their families, and for the disadvantaged communities, these religious institutions have the potential to play an important role in promoting the health and well-being of those they care for.

The intervention of the church community of affiliation is important in supporting them, developing relationships, in partnership with NGOs and volunteers, to find a job, a home, and thus the chances of a recurrence decrease considerably, only 15% do not identify any effect in participating in moral-religious activities (explanation: **Chart 4**).

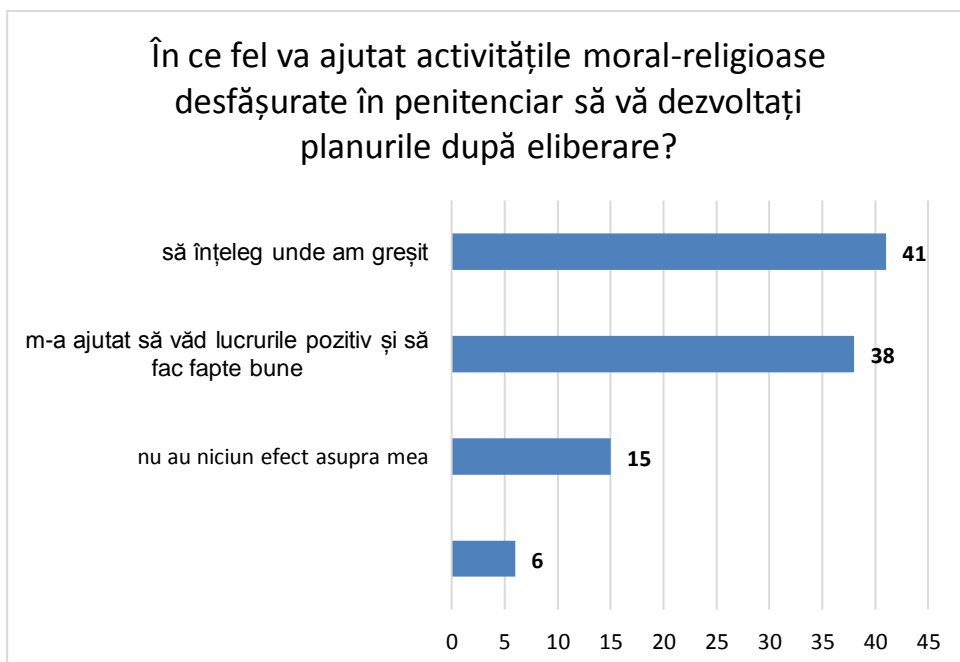


Chart 4.

How has taking part in moral and religious activities in prison help you make plans after your release?

(I understood what I did wrong, It helped me be more positive and do good deeds,

The relationship needs are essential elements that raise the quality of life, increasing the number of relationships can mitigate the potential for problems. Life programs and professional skills allow the development of roles, functional routines and also help developing pro-social behavior. Given the premise that prisons have limited

resources to materially help those deprived of their liberty, maintaining links with support circles is vital, at 99%, identifying a resource for family, community and friends to support the social reintegration (explanation: **Chart 5**).

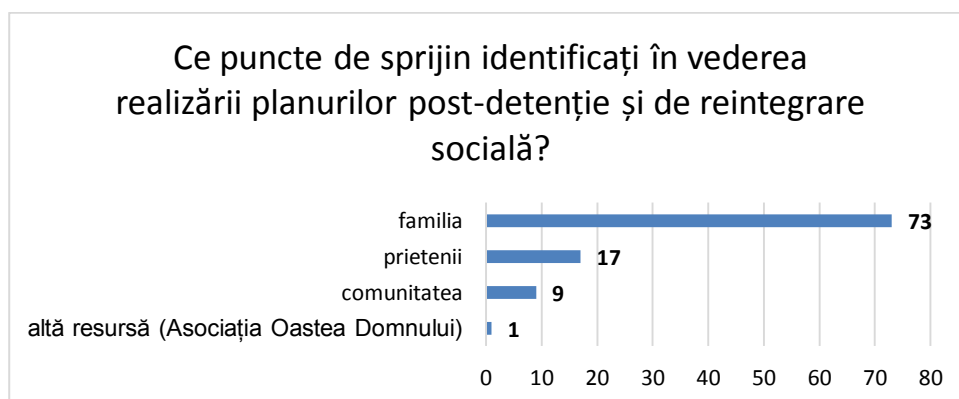


Chart 5.

What pillars of support do you find in realising your post-detentional plans and your reintegration in the

Religious activities in the penitentiary alone cannot provide an easy path to the social reintegration of the detainees. It is rather the material aspects of life that cannot be solved by faith alone. The perception of the detainees regarding the social factors that will negatively influence the social reintegration highlights the lack of trust given to state institutions, being - in this sense - invoked the issue of labeling, the pejorative term "former prisoner" having negative repercussions in possible attempts of the former convict to rehabilitate. 11% of the group subject to the research consider that they will be the aims for the prejudices of others. Another explanation can be found in the scope of detention. Taking into account the major social changes taking place in the Romanian society, individuals cannot assess how their material situation will change after 5 years of detention and to what extent these changes will affect their social reintegration. Given the high share of subjects with sentences of more than 5 years (22%), 76% of them identify a major problem being the lack of a job. Also, the social housing crisis in Romania strongly affects the prison population segment, often marginalized compared to other needy categories (families with children, young people getting out of orphanages, the abandoned elderly, people with disabilities etc.), 13% identify homelessness as an impediment to their reintegration. Thus, the "vicious circle" in which detainees are being thrown in after their release, namely: precarious financial situation, lack of housing, difficulties in obtaining a job, lack of support from the state, factors that are correlated, all of these decrease the chances of a social reintegration; in many cases these individuals resort to crimes to solve the problems they face; there is a high risk of recidivism (explanation: **Chart 6**).

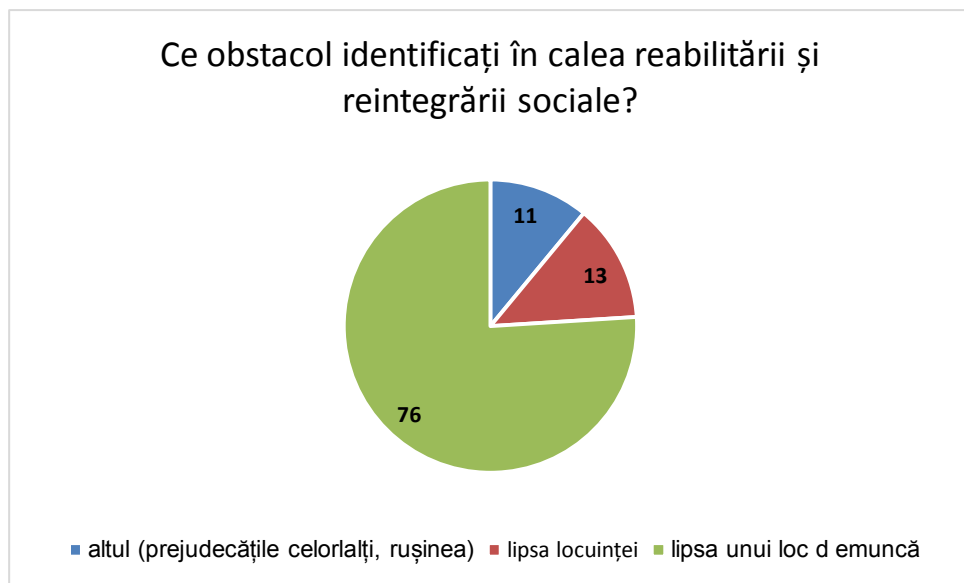


Chart 6.

What obstacles do you find in your rehabilitation and your social reintegration?

(Others –

The outlook for a religious life after the detainees will be released indicates an increase in religious activism, compared to the period before incarceration, with most detainees (58.6%) stating that they will participate equally, as during the execution of the sentence, in the religious life of the community. The result is also supported by the increasing importance given to the spiritual aspect of life after incarceration, an observation we mentioned above. Thus, we can say that the religious activity within the Gherla Penitentiary has a positive impact both in terms of the attitude towards spirituality, and in terms of subsequent involvement in religious activities. This aspect is essential from the perspective of social reintegration, a rich spiritual life that involves the acquisition of a prosocial behavior and the permanent development of social relationships, contributes to reducing the risk of recurrence (explanation: **Chart 7**).

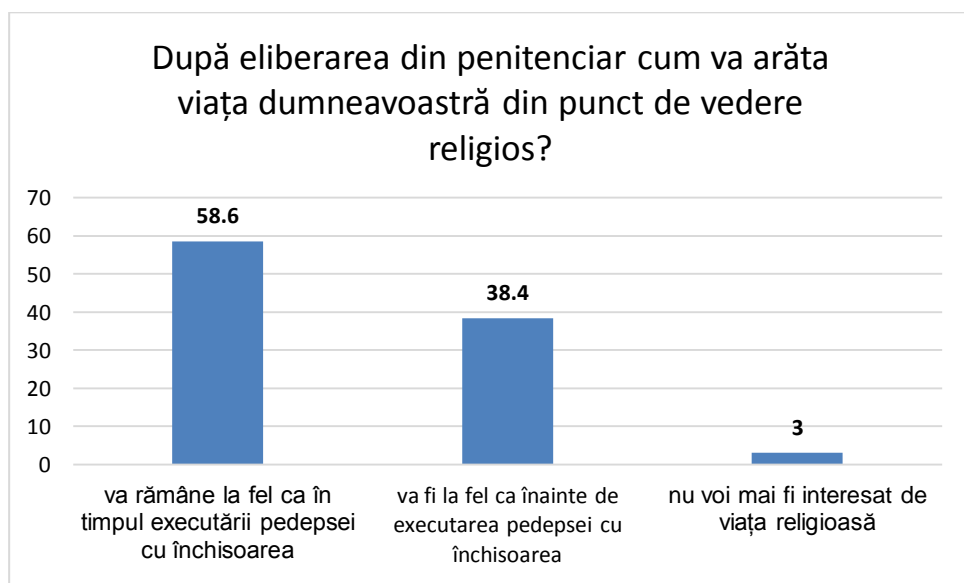


Chart 7.

After your release from prison how will your life look like from a religious point of view?

(The same as when I did my time; The same as before

Conclusions, Discussions

Most detainees believe that religion will help them in their social reintegration, due to the social relationships created within, maintained and developed through moral and religious activities, and regarding the appreciation of the role of faith in future personal and social life, most detainees believe that their religious activism will not end once they are released. The appreciation of the positive role of faith in the process of social reintegration is also confirmed in this section of the research. Believing in God explains the religious activism manifested after liberation, thereby reducing the feelings of social rejection.

As the resources of the penitentiary are limited in meeting the needs of those deprived of their liberty, the activities carried out by cults and volunteers in the penitentiary, by providing various material goods, are a real help. The chaplain priest, in collaboration with other missionary priests and volunteers who work in the detention unit, strongly support the reintegration process through the contribution they bring, developing relationships with NGOs to find a job, a home.

A specific objective of the penitentiary is to maintain the social relations of the convict with their close relatives. Therefore, the success of the social adaptation of the liberated persons largely depends on the social entourage in which they will return after the liberation, ie on those groups in which they will have to fulfill their social roles and functions. The main social factors perceived by detainees as acting as impediments in the process of integration into society are: the rejection based on the labeling of state institutions, poverty, homelessness, which increase the risk of recidivism.

Relational elements and life guidance programs are essential, they help to adapt, mitigate the potential for conflict and develop pro-social behaviors. Family support is a vital element in the reintegration of the detainees, as it plays a central role in building self-confidence and shaping their attitudes towards other members of society. Along with the family, finding a job represents the certainty of their acceptance in the society, a first step in the rehabilitation process. Through the status of an employee, the released ones prove their capacity to take responsibility, both at the level of their own household and at a social level.

If restrictions and the lack of prison activities have been associated with depression and apathy among inmates, as well as difficulties in reintegrating into disadvantaged communities (Curran & Wilkinson, 2010; Whiteford, 1997, 2000), the continued absence of relational needs may manifest as frustration, aggression or anger (Erskine, 1995). Reintegration programs in social life and increasing professional skills allow the development of functional roles and routines, as well as the development of pro-social behavior (Burtz, 2010). The literature presented shows that maintaining a close relationship with family members has the following benefits: better adaptation to the penitentiary environment, good collaboration with staff, low risk of suicide (Geller et al., 2009), increased quality and number of relationships can alleviate the potential for health problems and prevent depression (Faust et al., 1985), social anxiety (La Greca and Lopez, 1998), feelings of loneliness, and suicidal ideas (Bonanno & Hymel, 2010; Plămădeală V., 2018; Bonanno & Hymel, 2010; Erskine, 1995); the hypothesis is confirmed, namely that the detainees who participate in the moral and religious

activities carried out in the penitentiary benefit from the help of the church community to which they belong and develop positive relations to the realization of their post-detention plans and objectives.

Among the limitations of this research are the credibility of the detainees' responses, the little research at a national and international level, as well as restricted religious denomination, most detainees belonging to the Orthodox Church. As a future research direction, I propose conducting a longitudinal study by interviewing those deprived of liberty, the research subjects, after a period of time since their release, to see the results of their social reintegration based on the support of the church community.

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