

CAN A PRISON



An alternative model developed by Christians in Brazil offers incarcerated people much-needed opportunities. But is its success based on religious coercion?

BE GOOD?



By **Eléonore Hughes**

Photographs by
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When Graziela Mariano's former partner found out that she was in a relationship with someone else, he flew into a rage and attacked her. "We lived together for

13 years. He didn't accept the breakup," the 34-year-old Brazilian said. In defending herself, she ended up killing him.

Investigators eventually traced his death back to her. Mariano is waiting for her final sentence behind bars in the eastern city of São João del-Rei. But this jail, run by the Brazilian nonprofit Association for Protection and Assistance of Convicts (APAC), is not an ordinary penitentiary. "Theoretically, we're in prison. But we're not handcuffed and there are no weapons," Mariano said.

In the 68 facilities that the nonprofit manages across Brazil, APAC implements a model in which inmates run aspects of the prison themselves. They wear their own clothes, make their own food, and oversee security and discipline. Referred to as *recuperandos* ("recovering persons"), prisoners are called by their name rather than by a number. Mariano, a former trainee nurse, works at night distributing medicine to fellow prisoners.

Camila Kersul, a psychologist who offers support to the more than 400 inmates at APAC in São João del-Rei, said, "APAC is essentially about offering dignity to inmates. The idea is to save the person's identity to boost their self-esteem."

Created by a group of Brazilian Catholics in the early 1970s, the acronym originally stood for *Amando o Próximo, Amarás a Cristo* ("Loving thy neighbor, thou shalt love Christ"). Christianity remains at the heart of the nonprofit's philosophy. "God is the source of everything," reads the final guiding principle of APAC's decalogue. Each section of an APAC prison has a prayer room with Bibles and a cross where inmates are encouraged to renew themselves and take time out for reflection when they feel overwhelmed.

Mariano was delighted to move to the APAC facility eight months ago. She spent more than a year in a traditional prison: "I was pepper-sprayed. Food came with cockroaches. It was chaos, and guards were very cruel." Not once was she permitted to see her three children, ages 6, 9, and 15. In APAC prisons, family ties are part of a prisoner's rehabilitation. "Here, I arrived

on a Tuesday and on the Sunday, I saw my family," she said.

PRISONERS' RIGHTS

The total prison population in Brazil exceeds 800,000, less than only China and the United States. Conditions are notoriously horrific. In 2021, a report from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights said that across Brazil, inmates were "often held in overcrowded and structurally deficient prisons, maltreated, and frequently subjected to torture." Windowless cells smell of urine and feces, and prisoners compete for space to sleep on the floor. In this context, Brazil's penitentiary system has become a breeding ground for some of the most powerful organized crime groups in Latin America. Deadly riots are a regular occurrence.

In APAC prisons, cells are kept spotlessly clean, food is fresh, and each inmate has their own bed. Not more than seven people sleep in a cell. Education is an essential part of the rehabilitation program. Some inmates learn to read and write, while others can pursue degrees online.

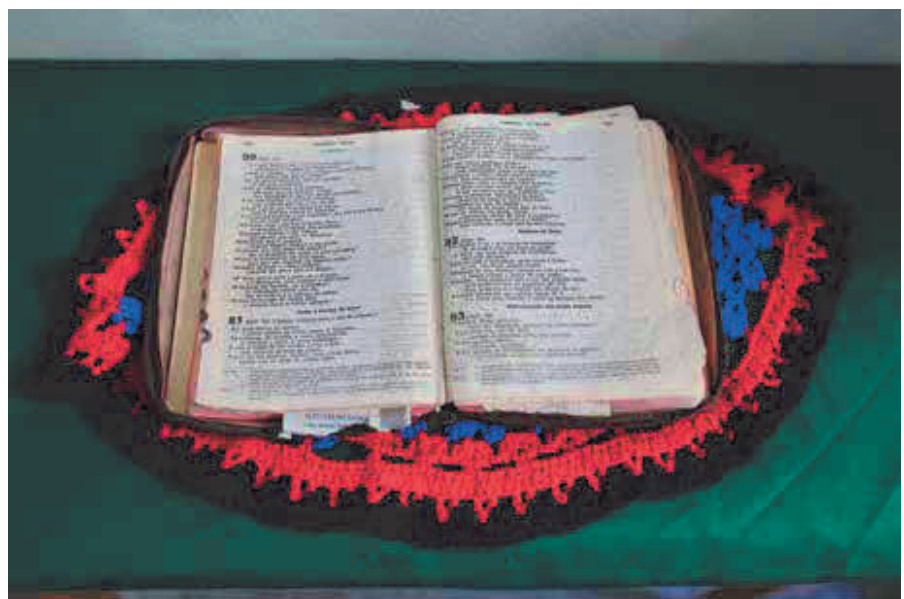
APAC facilities also offer opportunities for inmates to try out different professions. At São João del-Rei, activities are split along traditional gender lines. Men learn the basics of woodwork, masonry, metallurgy, or farming. Women can participate in three-month beautician, hairdressing, cooking, or nursing workshops.

The conspicuous differences from traditional prisons can only be applauded, said Heidi Cerneka, a Maryknoll lay missionary who lived in Brazil for 18 years and advocated for prisoners' rights as part of her



work for the Catholic organization. But access to warm showers, education, and work opportunities should be the norm, Cerneka said. Fernanda Prates, a law professor at Brazil's Getúlio Vargas Foundation, agrees. "A prisoner loses their freedom but not their fundamental rights," Prates said.

APAC prisons accept people convicted of all types of crimes, although drug-related offenses are the most prevalent, said Denio Marx Menezes, director of international





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relations for the Brazilian Fraternity of Assistance to Convicted Persons, an organization founded in 1995 to ensure the unity and uniformity across APAC’s prisons. In 2006, Brazil’s federal government adopted an anti-drug policy that aimed to distinguish dealers from users. But the lack of clear criteria has left interpretation to judges, which experts argue has contributed to the overall increase in Brazil’s prison population.

REDUCING RECIDIVISM

APAC’s main objective is to ensure inmates do not return to crime after their sentence has been served. But recidivism rates are notoriously difficult to calculate with accuracy. According to a report by the state court of Minas Gerais in southeastern Brazil, the recidivism rate following time in an

APAC prison was 13.7 percent for men and 2.27 percent for women, calculated over a five-year period (based on those who left an APAC prison in 2014). Brazil’s Department of Justice reports a national average of recidivism at 39 percent after five years, though some argue it is as high as 85 percent.

Leonardo Henrique, who is serving a 19-year sentence for drug trafficking, said that after being treated with dignity at the APAC facility in São João del-Rei, he renounced crime. “The likelihood of coming out of a normal prison and returning to crime is very high, because it’s difficult to believe in ourselves if no one else does,” he said. Henrique hopes to become a judicial assistant to a judge who doesn’t believe in rehabilitation and prove the judge wrong.

The low recidivism rate raises the question of why all Brazilian prisons are not

drawing from APAC’s success and applying its method. The methodology has been implemented in Germany, South Korea, and elsewhere. But APAC has no intention of replacing regular jails. APAC penitentiaries are intended to run “side by side” regular prisons, according to Marx.

As a result, APAC prisons run the risk of legitimizing the carceral system, Prates said. “We should be thinking about how sentences can be served outside penitentiaries,” she added. For Prates, a further concern lies in the outsourcing of prisons to a nongovernmental organization. Ninety percent of APAC funding comes from state governments, according to Marx. Nevertheless, if the state is the only entity with the right to deprive someone of their freedom, Prates said, it should also be responsible for implementation.

INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY

New inmates entering the São João del-Rei facility are greeted by a sign bearing the words: “Here the [person] enters, the crime stays outside.” APAC views crime through the lens of individual moral error.

Henrique concurs, admitting, “I went down the wrong path,” he said. “When we are free, we make our own choices.” Yet Henrique also described how he grew up in an area of São João del-Rei with a high crime rate and how he admired the drug traffickers who had motorbikes, rather than bicycles. He did not complete high school, which he has now done since arriving at the facility three years ago.

As Henrique’s story indicates, structural injustices contribute to crime, said Joanne Blaney, regional director for Maryknoll in Brazil. APAC’s model fails to take this into consideration. “In a crime, there is individual responsibility, but also collective responsibility of the state and society,” she said.

When justice systems focus solely on the individual, power structures based on class, gender, and race that produce and reproduce violence are ignored. Prisons should be abolished, the argument goes, because they target marginalized and impoverished social groups. The prison system is used as a solution to economic, social, and political problems, arising from overlapping interests between the state and industries that profit from incarceration—the so-called prison industrial complex.

In this view, the prison systems both in Brazil and the U.S. uphold an unequal structure that has its roots in slavery. Black people are overrepresented in Brazil’s prison

population, constituting around 67 percent of total incarcerated people, according to a report by the think tank Brazilian Forum on Public Security. A little more than 50 percent of Brazilians declared themselves Black and mixed race in a 2010 national census.

Similar to the U.S, some church groups in Brazil advocate prison abolition. The Prison Pastoral, a social ministry linked to the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil, offers religious assistance to prisoners and seeks to challenge human rights violations. Citing Pope Francis' invitation for Catholics "to go forth and preach the Gospel to all: to all places, on all occasions, without hesitation, reluctance, or fear," the Prison Pastoral anchors its daily fight against prisons in this movement of a church reaching "all the 'peripheries.'"

IMPOSING FAITH?

Inmates are required to spend time in the traditional prison system before a judge can send them to state-funded APAC facilities. Adaptation to the APAC model can be challenging. In regular prisons, many choose to take medication to sleep through both days and nights, according to Antonio Fuzatto, president of the APAC unit in São João del-Rei. In APAC facilities, inmates are expected to wake up daily at 6 a.m. and spend a full day doing chores, activities, and studies until their 10 p.m. bedtime. If the person fails to adapt, they can be returned to the regular system. This serves as an "incentive for compliance," according to Fuzatto.

Critics argue that this amounts to psychological and religious coercion: Either one adapts to the APAC method, and thus retains access to education and dignified conditions, or one returns to the hellhole of standard jail.

Vanessa dos Passos, a 30-year-old Black woman serving an 18-year sentence for drug trafficking, ran away from the APAC in São João del-Rei three times. Now, she is responsible for managing comings and goings into the women's facility. In charge of the keys, she could slip away at will. But she has decided it is futile. "If I run away, I'll just be sent to another prison. Who will suffer? I will," dos Passos said. "I still suffer, especially for not being able to look after my son, but a lot less than before. I used to wake up wanting to die or wanting to kill someone," she said.

Dos Passos was once a professional volleyball player in the nearby city of Belo Horizonte. After her older brother was ar-





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rested for homicide and drug trafficking, she said she spent a year crying in her bedroom. When she went to see him in prison, she also became tangled in drug trafficking. She was 15. Since arriving at the APAC more than two years ago, dos Passos has converted to Christianity. A former practitioner of the Afro-Brazilian religion Candomblé, she now identifies as evangelical. “God can help you without needing gifts—thanks to faith only,” she explained.

Brazilian law guarantees prisoners the right to assistance with religious practice, but Prates said APAC imposes it. In all facilities, inmates meet at 7 a.m. for the obligatory “Good morning, Jesus” ritual, which involves songs of praise and readings from the Bible. In a secular nation, such an im-

position may clash with freedom to believe or not. Marx stands by APAC’s approach. “APAC stimulates spirituality because it is inherent in each human being,” he said.

Dilermando do Carmo Camara, who is serving a 20-year sentence for drug trafficking and violence, said God saved his life. Two years ago, he was struggling with severe depression. “When I was put into prison for the third time, I no longer had the will to live,” he said, glancing down at white scars on his wrists. He turned to God for help, and believes his prayers were answered. Not long after, the family of a friend started visiting him.

Do Carmo credits APAC with giving inmates the tools to rebuild their lives. “Seven years in the other prison didn’t give me what I’ve gained in five months here.” He is also grateful to APAC for giving him the possibility of speaking about his faith to other prisoners. An evangelical, do Carmo is rarely without a copy of the Bible tucked under his arm. “When I get out, I want to continue spreading my love for God,” he said.

Brazilian liberation theologian Carlos Alberto Libânio Christo (better known as Frei Betto) has critiqued APAC penitentiaries as practicing religious coercion and “distorting the essentially free nature of the act of faith.” Drawing on work by political scientist Maria Soares de Camargo, Frei Betto wrote, “To impose on an incarcerated person the exclusive option of adhering to Christianity with access to freedom, is to reduce the gift of God to a disciplinary ideology of religious character.”

A conundrum remains. APAC prisons are an oasis in a bleak landscape, and many are grateful to be there. But should Christians be managing state-funded prisons as an extension of ministry? And under what conditions can one freely accept the gospel of Christ? ❖

