

THE CRISIS OF RESOCIALIZATION IN THE ROMANIAN PENITENTIARY SYSTEM. THE ROLE OF THE PRISON CHAPLAIN BETWEEN SPIRITUAL FUNCTION AND SOCIAL REINTEGRATION MECHANISM

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Abstract

The issue of resocialization of persons deprived of liberty represents one of the core theoretical and normative pillars of enforcement criminal law, being expressly enshrined both in domestic legislation and in the European legal instruments governing the execution of custodial sentences. Nevertheless, the practical realities of the Romanian penitentiary system reveal a persistent structural gap between the normative recognition of resocialization and the actual capacity of detention institutions to translate this objective into a coherent and effective rehabilitative process. Against this background, the present paper examines the crisis of resocialization through the lens of non-punitive mechanisms capable of mitigating the criminogenic effects of imprisonment, with particular emphasis on the role of the prison chaplain within the penitentiary framework.

The analysis is grounded in the legal foundations of religious assistance in detention, understood not merely as an expression of the right to freedom of religion, but also as an instrument for safeguarding human dignity and facilitating social reintegration. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach, the paper explores the historical development of prison chaplaincy, the relevant national and European normative framework, as well as the institutional and functional limits of religious intervention in the contemporary context of sentence enforcement.

The study ultimately advances the argument that, despite being frequently marginalized within the formal architecture of resocialization programs, the prison chaplain constitutes one of the few stable forms of non-coercive interaction in the penitentiary environment, capable of contributing to the reconstruction of personal identity and moral agency among detainees. Without advocating a singular or universal solution, the paper underscores the need to reassess religious assistance as a complementary component of enforcement criminal policy, essential for addressing the current crisis of resocialization in the Romanian penitentiary system.

Keywords: *resocialization in detention, Romanian penitentiary system, prison chaplaincy, social reintegration of offenders, execution of custodial sentences.*

1. Introduction

The issue of resocialization of persons deprived of liberty constitutes one of the fundamental dimensions of contemporary enforcement criminal law, being explicitly enshrined in the European standards governing the execution of sentences. In this regard, at the level of the Council of Europe it is provided that “All detention shall be managed so as to facilitate the reintegration into free society of persons who have been deprived of their liberty.”¹

This normative recognition indicates that the execution of sentences does not have an exclusively repressive function, but necessarily entails an objective of social reintegration. However, the specialized literature and criminal policy analyses have shown that a mere increase in incarceration does not necessarily lead to a reduction in crime and, in certain contexts, may even produce effects contrary to the intended preventive purpose.²

The importance of the topic is emphasized by the fact that resocialization is closely linked to the respect for the fundamental rights of persons deprived of liberty. The European Court of Human Rights has held that “Prisoners in general continue to enjoy all the fundamental rights and freedoms guaranteed under the Convention save for the right to liberty” (Hirst v. the United Kingdom (No. 2), para. 69).³

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¹ Available at https://hrlibrary.umn.edu/instate/COE_prison-rules.html, accessed on March 28, 2026.

² Available at https://www.vera.org/downloads/publications/for-the-record-prison-paradox-incarceration-not-safer/legacy_downloads/for-the-record-prison-paradox_01.pdf, accessed on March 24, 2026.

³ Available at [https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{%22itemid%22:\[%22001-70442%22\]}](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{%22itemid%22:[%22001-70442%22]}), accessed on 24.03.2026.

In this context, freedom of religion occupies an essential place, being also recognized in international standards concerning the treatment of prisoners. Thus, at the level of the United Nations, it is provided that “so far as practicable, every prisoner shall be allowed to satisfy the needs of his religious life.”⁴

These standards justify the analysis of the role of the prison chaplain within the penitentiary environment, not only as an expression of a spiritual function, but also as a potential instrument of intervention in the process of social reintegration. The specialized literature highlights that religious-based interventions may have an impact on criminal behavior, in the sense that “the results of this study indicate that faith-based programs ‘work’ to reduce recidivism”⁵, while at the same time being considered “one of many potential tools for preparing inmates for successful reentry into society.”⁶

In this context, the present study aims to analyze the crisis of resocialization within the Romanian penitentiary system by reference to the role of the prison chaplain, employing an interdisciplinary approach situated at the intersection of enforcement criminal law and the sociology of detention. The research seeks to highlight both the legal foundations of religious assistance and its limits and potential within the contemporary enforcement-penal framework.

In relation to the existing specialized literature, this research is situated within a direction that remains insufficiently explored in Romanian legal doctrine, where the role of non-coercive actors in the resocialization process has not been systematically examined. Although there are studies addressing freedom of religion in detention and the effects of religion on criminal behavior, they do not coherently integrate the function of the chaplain within the framework of enforcement criminal policy, which justifies the need for such an analysis.

2. The Crisis of Resocialization as the Premise for Reassessing the Role of the Prison Chaplain

Any society functions on the basis of a system of social and moral norms and values, the observance of which is expected from all its members. When these norms are violated through deviant or unlawful conduct, the state intervenes through punitive and coercive measures, the most severe of which is the deprivation of liberty. Penitentiary institutions are thus commonly perceived as spaces of restriction and exclusion, where individuals who have committed socially reprehensible acts serve custodial sentences. Within this context, the involvement of religious institutions represents an important dimension of societal response to deviance, reflecting a broader concern for the individual beyond the purely punitive framework. The Church’s mission extends to all individuals, including those deprived of liberty, who remain part of the moral and social community despite their incarceration. This mission is concretely carried out through prison chaplains, whose presence within penitentiary institutions ensures the exercise of religious freedom and provides spiritual assistance to detainees. In the penitentiary environment, the prison chaplain may assume a distinct role, situated at the intersection between spiritual guidance and moral support. His activity is not limited to the performance of religious services, but may contribute to processes of self-reflection, responsibility, and personal transformation among detainees. In this sense, the chaplain’s mission can be understood as facilitating the reconstruction of the individual’s moral framework and the re-establishment of a meaningful connection with fundamental values, which may support, in certain circumstances, the broader objective of social reintegration.⁷

The resocialization of persons deprived of liberty is consistently affirmed, at both national and European levels, as a fundamental objective of the execution of custodial sentences, being expressly reflected in contemporary legal standards, which provide that “All detention shall be managed so as to facilitate the reintegration into free society of persons who have been deprived of their liberty”⁸ thus indicating that imprisonment is no longer conceived exclusively as a mechanism of repression, but as a process inherently

⁴ Available at https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Nelson_Mandela_Rules-E-ebook.pdf, accessed on 28.03.2026.

⁵ KIMBERLY D. DODSON and LEANN N. CABAGE, PAUL M. KLENOWSKI, *An Evidence-Based Assessment of Faith-Based Programs: Do Faith-Based Programs “Work” to Reduce Recidivism?*, *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 50:367–383, 2011, Taylor & Francis Group, LLC, p.368, Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232992536_An_Evidence-Based_Assessment_of_Faith-Based_Programs_Do_Faith-Based_Programs_Work_to_Reduce_Recidivism, accessed on 20.03.2026.

⁶ Scott D. Camp, Dawn M. Daggett, Okyun Kwon, Jody KleinSaffran, *The effect of faith program participation on prison misconduct: The Life Connections Program*, *Journal of Criminal Justice*, Volume 36, Issue 5, September–October 2008, Pages 389–395, Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0047235208000858>, accessed on 20.03.2026.

⁷ Alexandru Fleșer, *Antologie de intervenții pastoral-terapeutice în context penitenciar*, Ed. Episcopiei Devei și Hunedoarei, Deva, 2025, p. 11.

⁸ Available at https://hrlibrary.umn.edu/instreet/COE_prison-rules.html, accessed on March 28, 2026.

oriented towards reintegration into society. This orientation is further reinforced at the level of international norms, where it is stated that “The purposes of a sentence of imprisonment... are primarily to protect society against crime and to reduce recidivism”,⁹ thereby highlighting the dual dimension of punishment, situated between protection and rehabilitation.

However, despite this coherent normative framework, the practical realities of penitentiary systems reveal a persistent structural tension between the declared purpose of resocialization and its actual implementation, as the institutional environment of detention, characterized by control, hierarchy and constraint, often proves incompatible with the individualized processes required for genuine reintegration. This dynamic may be understood in light of broader theoretical approaches to punishment, according to which the prison functions as an apparatus of discipline, suggesting that the penitentiary space is primarily structured around mechanisms of control rather than transformation.

As a consequence, resocialization risks becoming a formal objective rather than an effective outcome, embedded in legal discourse but only partially realized in practice, particularly in systems where rehabilitative programs are limited in scope or reduced to procedural compliance. Empirical analyses of penal policy further indicate that the expansion of incarceration does not necessarily achieve its preventive goals, it being observed that “Increased incarceration has no effect on violent crime and may actually lead to higher crime rates when incarceration is concentrated in certain communities”¹⁰ which calls into question the effectiveness of purely custodial approaches.

Within this context, the crisis of resocialization should not be understood merely as the result of logistical or administrative shortcomings, but rather as a structural imbalance between the punitive logic of imprisonment and its rehabilitative purpose, an imbalance that reveals the limitations of traditional, predominantly coercive mechanisms of intervention. It is precisely within this normative and functional gap that the role of non-coercive actors becomes increasingly relevant, as they operate outside the rigid framework of institutional authority and may access dimensions of the individual that remain insufficiently engaged by standard penitentiary programs.

Among these actors, the prison chaplain occupies a distinct and insufficiently explored position, as his activity is not grounded in discipline, evaluation or coercion, but in dialogue, trust and moral engagement, thus introducing a fundamentally different type of interaction within the penitentiary environment. In a system largely defined by control and restriction, the chaplain may function as a rare vector of non-coercive influence, capable of facilitating processes of introspection, responsibility and personal re-evaluation, which are essential for any meaningful attempt at reintegration.

Therefore, the crisis of resocialization does not merely expose the limits of existing institutional mechanisms, but also highlights the necessity of reassessing the contribution of actors traditionally situated at the margins of the formal rehabilitative framework. In this sense, the prison chaplain should not be regarded as a peripheral religious presence, but as a potentially relevant element within a system that formally affirms reintegration while struggling to achieve it in practice, thus justifying a deeper analysis of his role at the intersection between spiritual assistance and social reintegration.

3. The Role of the Prison Chaplain Between Spiritual Function and Social Reintegration

The prison chaplain becomes a counselor by virtue of the circumstances in which he carries out his activity. Persons deprived of liberty turn to him in order to identify and, more importantly, to address various spiritual concerns. The awareness that the chaplain possesses a solid theological background encourages detainees to approach him with the spiritual issues that trouble them. Within the framework of moral-religious counseling, several needs have been identified among those who engage in this process. The first identified need is that of relational connection. Persons deprived of liberty feel the need to draw closer to the chaplain, often perceiving him as a friend. The realization that the penitentiary environment deprives them of the support of family or friends plays a decisive role in fostering this closeness.¹¹

⁹ Available at https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Nelson_Mandela_Rules-E-ebook.pdf, accessed on March 28, 2026.

¹⁰ Available at https://www.vera.org/downloads/publications/for-the-record-prison-paradox-incarceration-not-safer/legacy_downloads/for-the-record-prison-paradox_01.pdf, accessed on March 24, 2026.

¹¹ Alexandru Fleșer, *Antologie de intervenții pastoral-terapeutice în context penitenciar*, Ed. Episcopiei Devei și Hunedoarei, Deva, 2025, p. 11.

The presence of the prison chaplain within the penitentiary system must be understood not merely as a manifestation of religious freedom, but as a complex institutional function situated at the intersection between spiritual assistance and the broader objective of social reintegration. At the normative level, the role of religion in detention is explicitly recognized, as international standards provide that “so far as practicable, every prisoner shall be allowed to satisfy the needs of his religious life”¹², thus establishing the chaplain’s presence as a guarantee of a fundamental right, rather than a discretionary or symbolic element of the penitentiary environment.

However, the relevance of the prison chaplain cannot be reduced to the mere facilitation of religious practices. While the formal dimension of his activity consists in ensuring access to worship and spiritual guidance, the actual impact of his presence extends beyond this framework, operating within a domain that intersects with moral reconstruction, personal reflection and the reconfiguration of individual identity. In a setting defined predominantly by coercion and institutional authority, the chaplain introduces a different type of relational dynamic, one that is not grounded in hierarchy or control, but in voluntary engagement and trust.

This distinction becomes particularly significant in light of the structural limitations of traditional resocialization mechanisms, which often operate within rigid institutional parameters and may fail to generate genuine internal change. In contrast, the interaction between the detainee and the chaplain is not mediated by disciplinary expectations or evaluative criteria, but by the possibility of dialogue and personal transformation, which allows access to dimensions of the individual that remain largely inaccessible within formal correctional programs. In this sense, the chaplain may function as a non-coercive vector of influence within a coercive system, contributing to processes that cannot be fully institutionalized.

The potential contribution of spiritual assistance to the process of reintegration is further supported by empirical observations, according to which religious engagement may influence behavioral patterns and post-detention outcomes, it being noted that “religious-based programming... has also been shown to reduce recidivism”,¹³ thus suggesting that the internalization of moral values may have tangible effects beyond the strictly spiritual sphere. At the same time, other analyses emphasize that such interventions represent “one of many potential tools for preparing inmates for successful reentry into society”,¹⁴ which reinforces the idea that the chaplain’s role should be understood as complementary rather than substitutive.

Nevertheless, the positioning of the prison chaplain between spiritual function and social reintegration raises a series of conceptual and practical challenges. On the one hand, reducing his role to a purely religious dimension risks ignoring the broader impact of his activity within the penitentiary environment. On the other hand, overestimating his contribution may lead to an unrealistic expectation that spiritual assistance alone can compensate for the structural deficiencies of the resocialization system. The balance between these two perspectives is essential for a coherent understanding of his institutional role.

In this context, the chaplain’s activity can be interpreted as facilitating a process of moral reorientation, through which the detainee is encouraged to reassess his past conduct and to reconstruct a framework of values capable of supporting lawful behavior after release. This process, although difficult to quantify, plays a significant role in shaping individual attitudes and motivations, elements that are indispensable for any effective form of reintegration. Thus, while the chaplain does not operate within the formal mechanisms of correctional policy, his contribution may intersect with its objectives in a meaningful way.

Ultimately, the role of the prison chaplain should be situated within the broader logic of a penitentiary system that formally promotes reintegration, yet struggles to achieve it through conventional means. In such a context, the chaplain emerges as a distinct actor whose relevance derives precisely from his position outside the traditional structures of authority, allowing him to engage with the individual at a level that is less accessible to institutional actors. Consequently, his function cannot be reduced to that of a religious service provider, but must be understood as part of a wider, albeit insufficiently recognized, framework of non-coercive interventions contributing to the process of social reintegration.

¹² Available at https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Nelson_Mandela_Rules-E-ebook.pdf, accessed on March 28, 2026.

¹³ Allie C. Bosi, Religious-based programming and reentry success: an examination of spirituality and its effects on post-release engagement, employment, and recidivism, 2021, available at: <https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=6172&context=td>, accessed on March 28, 2026.

¹⁴ Scott D. Camp, Dawn M. Daggett, Okyun Kwon, Jody KleinSaffran, The effect of faith program participation on prison misconduct: The Life Connections Program, *Journal of Criminal Justice*, vol. 36, Issue 5, September–October 2008, p. 389-395, available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0047235208000858>, accessed on 20.03.2026.

4. Structural Limits of Chaplaincy and the Risk of Overestimation

While the role of the prison chaplain may reveal significant potential within the broader framework of resocialization, it is essential to approach this function with a critical perspective that acknowledges its inherent limitations. The tendency to emphasize the positive effects of spiritual assistance must be balanced by an understanding of the structural constraints that shape the penitentiary environment, as well as the institutional position occupied by the chaplain within it.

A first and fundamental limitation derives from the very nature of the penitentiary system, which remains predominantly structured around control, discipline and security. As previously noted, the prison operates within a framework in which “the prison functions as an apparatus of discipline”,¹⁵ a reality that inevitably conditions all forms of interaction taking place within it. In such an environment, any non-coercive intervention, including that of the chaplain, is constrained by institutional priorities that do not necessarily favor individualized or relational approaches.

Beyond this structural dimension, a particularly significant limitation concerns the shortage of personnel, which directly affects the capacity of prison chaplains to engage in meaningful and sustained interaction with detainees. In practice, the number of chaplains assigned to penitentiary units is often insufficient in relation to the size of the incarcerated population, resulting in a disproportionate ratio that limits both accessibility and continuity. Under these conditions, the chaplain’s activity risks becoming fragmented and episodic, rather than consistent and transformative.

The consequences of this imbalance are substantial. The effectiveness of moral-religious counseling depends, to a considerable extent, on the existence of a stable and trust-based relationship between the chaplain and the detainee, a relationship that requires time, availability and continuity.

However, when a single chaplain is required to address the needs of a large number of inmates, the possibility of developing such relationships is significantly reduced. As a result, the chaplain may be confined to fulfilling predominantly formal or ritual functions, with limited capacity to engage in deeper processes of personal reflection and moral reconstruction.

Moreover, the shortage of personnel must be understood not only in quantitative terms, but also in relation to the complexity of the needs present within the penitentiary environment. Persons deprived of liberty often experience multiple layers of vulnerability, including psychological distress, social disconnection and moral disorientation. Addressing these issues requires sustained engagement and individualized attention, which cannot be effectively provided under conditions of institutional overload.

This structural limitation also reinforces the risk of overestimating the role of the prison chaplain within the resocialization process. While spiritual assistance may contribute to personal transformation, it cannot substitute for the absence or inefficiency of other essential components of reintegration, such as education, psychological support or social reintegration programs. The chaplain’s role must therefore be understood as complementary, operating alongside other mechanisms rather than replacing them.

In this context, the tendency to attribute a central or decisive role to the chaplain in overcoming the crisis of resocialization must be approached with caution. Such an approach risks obscuring the systemic nature of the problem and transferring responsibility from institutional structures to individual actors. The limitations imposed by insufficient staffing, combined with the broader constraints of the penitentiary system, demonstrate that the chaplain’s contribution, while valuable, remains structurally conditioned and necessarily partial.

Ultimately, a realistic assessment of the prison chaplain’s role requires acknowledging both its potential and its limits. The chaplain may function as a meaningful point of support within a system marked by rigidity and constraint, but his capacity to influence the process of resocialization is intrinsically linked to the institutional conditions in which he operates. Without addressing issues such as staffing shortages and structural imbalance, the impact of chaplaincy will remain significant at an individual level, yet limited in its systemic effects.

5. Conclusions

The analysis undertaken in this study has sought to examine the crisis of resocialization within the Romanian penitentiary system through a specific and insufficiently explored lens, namely the role of the prison

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and punish*, p. 170-171, available at: <https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/sites.psu.edu/dist/d/37602/files/2016/01/Discipline-and-Punish.pdf> accessed on 28.03.2026.

chaplain situated between spiritual assistance and the broader objective of social reintegration. Far from constituting a marginal or purely symbolic presence, the chaplain emerges as a distinct actor whose relevance becomes particularly visible precisely in the context of the structural limitations that affect contemporary resocialization mechanisms.

The normative framework governing the execution of custodial sentences, both at the European and international level, clearly establishes reintegration as a central objective of imprisonment. However, the persistence of structural deficiencies within penitentiary systems reveals a significant gap between this declared purpose and its effective realization. The predominance of custodial logic, the rigidity of institutional structures, and the limited effectiveness of traditional rehabilitative programs contribute to a situation in which resocialization risks remaining, to a considerable extent, a formal aspiration rather than a tangible outcome.

Within this context, the prison chaplain occupies a position that is both unique and paradoxical. On the one hand, his presence is formally justified by the need to ensure the exercise of a fundamental right, namely freedom of religion. On the other hand, the actual impact of his activity extends beyond this legal function, engaging dimensions of the individual that are only partially addressed by institutional mechanisms. Unlike other actors within the penitentiary system, the chaplain does not operate through coercion, evaluation, or disciplinary authority, but through dialogue, trust, and moral engagement. This distinction is not merely formal, but has substantive implications for the way in which detainees experience and internalize the process of change.

The capacity of the chaplain to facilitate processes of introspection, responsibility, and moral reorientation highlights an essential aspect of resocialization that is often overlooked in institutional approaches, namely the internal transformation of the individual. While educational or psychological programs may address cognitive or behavioral dimensions, the chaplain's intervention engages with the sphere of values, meaning, and personal identity. In this sense, spiritual assistance may contribute to the reconstruction of a moral framework capable of supporting lawful conduct after release, thus intersecting with the broader objectives of reintegration.

At the same time, the analysis has emphasized the necessity of maintaining a critical perspective regarding the scope and limits of this role. The effectiveness of chaplaincy cannot be considered in isolation from the structural conditions of the penitentiary system. The shortage of personnel, in particular, represents a significant constraint, limiting the chaplain's ability to engage in sustained and individualized interaction with detainees. In many cases, the disproportion between the number of chaplains and the size of the incarcerated population reduces the possibility of developing meaningful relationships, which are essential for any process of moral or personal transformation.

Moreover, the broader institutional context, characterized by an emphasis on security and control, further restricts the potential impact of non-coercive interventions. In such an environment, the chaplain's activity may be confined to episodic or formal functions, rather than constituting a continuous and structured contribution to resocialization. These limitations underscore the risk of overestimating the role of the chaplain and of attributing to spiritual assistance a capacity to compensate for systemic deficiencies that require, in reality, structural reform.

Consequently, the role of the prison chaplain should be understood in a balanced and nuanced manner. It would be both inaccurate and counterproductive to either minimize his contribution or to elevate it to a central and exclusive mechanism of reintegration. Instead, chaplaincy should be conceptualized as a complementary form of intervention, operating alongside other institutional mechanisms, and addressing dimensions of the individual that are otherwise insufficiently engaged.

From this perspective, the crisis of resocialization does not merely highlight the limits of existing programs, but also reveals the need to reconsider the architecture of intervention within the penitentiary system. The inclusion and recognition of non-coercive actors, such as the prison chaplain, may represent an important step towards a more comprehensive and effective approach to reintegration. However, such recognition must be accompanied by adequate institutional support, including sufficient staffing and the integration of chaplaincy within a broader, coherent resocialization strategy.

Ultimately, the contribution of the prison chaplain lies not in replacing existing mechanisms, but in complementing them through a form of engagement that reaches beyond formal structures and addresses the deeper layers of personal transformation. In a system marked by structural constraints and functional imbalances, this type of intervention, although limited in scope, may nevertheless play a meaningful role in supporting the process of reintegration. The extent of this contribution, however, remains intrinsically linked to

the conditions under which it is exercised, reaffirming the need for a realistic and context-sensitive understanding of chaplaincy within the contemporary penitentiary system.

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