

A Reflection on the Death Penalty

What does the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” (Ex 20:13) mean for us today?

In 1972 the supreme court opened the door to states to rewrite death penalty statutes to eliminate the problems cited in *Furman v Georgia* that is; punishment would be “cruel and unusual” if it was too severe for the crime, if it offended society’s sense of justice, if it was arbitrary, or if it was more effective than a less severe penalty. Regrettably, the death penalty was reinstated in 1977. The 2006 year end report of the Death Penalty Information Center (DPIC) demonstrates that executions have dropped to their lowest level in ten years. States are grappling with problems related to the lethal injection process and wrongful convictions. A 2006 Gallup poll reported that more people support a sentence of life without parole over the death penalty.

Justice and the death penalty in particular, in our land are flawed. This is evident by the number of individuals who have been exonerated. Such flaws were uncovered in the state of Maryland by the findings of the 2003 University of Maryland study of the death penalty after Governor Glendening declared a moratorium on its’ practice. In 2006, Lt. Governor Steele submitted his recommendations for reform of the death penalty in Maryland after being asked by Governor Ehrlich to form a commission to study how Maryland implements this practice. During the recent election, governor-elect O’Malley told leaders of the Catholic Conference that he hopes Marylanders will come to “understand and accept both morally and intellectually that capital punishment doesn’t prevent crime or homicides.” In 2005, China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States were responsible for ninety four percent of executions in the world. (DPIC statistics).

We are created by God, the author and Lord of life, in his image. Every life is a precious gift from him and is destined for eternity. In responding to the universal call to holiness, our response must include respect for life and the dignity of every human being- even for those who deny the right to others. Those who inflict harm on others must be held accountable. Punishment exacted must temper the demands of justice with respect for human life and dignity. Who will ever forget the example of God’s love and mercy set by Pope John Paul II when he forgave his would be

assassin?

In 2005 the USCCB (United States Catholic Conference of Bishops) issued a new pastoral statement approved by its' full body of Bishops ("A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death"). In it they renewed their call first issued twenty five years earlier to end capital punishment in our country. "We renew our common conviction that it is time for our nation to abandon the illusion that we can protect life by taking life."

Less than two weeks after issuing their statement, Cardinal William H. Keeler, Archbishop of Baltimore, displayed God's mercy and love by paying a visit to death row inmate Wesley Eugene Baker. Despite the plea for mercy to commute his sentence to life without parole issued by Cardinal Keeler and his brother Bishops of the Maryland Catholic Conference to Governor Ehrlich, Baker would later be executed.

When the state ends a human life in this manner despite having non lethal alternatives, it does so in our (taxpayers) name. This act diminishes us all and it suggests that society can overcome one act of violence with another act of violence. As the USCCB statements suggests " working together to end the use of the death penalty is an integral and important part of resisting a culture of death and building a true culture of life."

I encourage my fellow Roman Catholics to reflect on our moral, not partisan, commitment to witness to being "...unconditionally pro life...." (Evangelium Vitae, 28) and then act in making an end to capital punishment in our country a reality. We can reflect on this by praying for the victims of crime and their loved ones. We can pray for those awaiting execution. We can pray for our law makers. We can act to make the end of this practice a reality by educating ourselves and others on the Catholic teaching on the death penalty. We can act by reaching out to families whose lives have been disrupted by violence. We can act by advocating for public policies that better protect us from perpetrators of violence without resorting to the death penalty.

"I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live." (Dt. 30:19)

Biographical Sketch

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