

Culture of Life

The Catholic Review

A Consistent Culture of Life

In our society, there is a great emphasis placed on value. Homes, cars, jewelry—even a college education—has a value or worth assigned to it. The process of determining the value of something is often predicated on what an individual is willing to pay for it. What that individual pays is referred to as the “fair market value” and is the basis of the valuation system used to set prices for nearly every commodity.

Unlike a house or a car or a diamond necklace, a human life cannot be assigned a price—or can it?

This past week, the first report to analyze the cost of capital punishment in Maryland was released. The study showed that the cost of reaching a single death sentence costs Marylanders an average of \$3 million—\$1.9 million more than the cost of a non-death penalty case, including the costs associated with a sentence of life in jail without parole.

The results of the study appeared in the news media on the day that our legislature was preparing to debate banning the death penalty in Maryland. Opponents of the death penalty welcomed the data because it counters one of the chief arguments of death penalty supporters.

The cost associated with the death-penalty is just one aspect of the debate about whether the state should execute its citizens. There are others who oppose capital punishment because of the prospect of error or because of the biases that seem inevitably to infect death-penalty proceedings.

In the Church’s view, efforts that focus exclusively on the legal and economic factors—efforts that seek merely to “fix” the death-penalty system by rendering it free from bias, or inequality, or human error, or a lengthy and costly legal

process—are insufficient to the need. For when all the legalistic overhauling is done, the fundamental moral question remains: are we permitted to take the life of another human being?

Pope John Paul II said, “Man’s life comes from God. It is His gift, His image and imprint, a sharing in His breadth of life. God, therefore, is the sole Lord of this life. Man cannot do with it as he wills.”

In the hearing before a Senate committee last week, representatives of the Church testified that our Church recognizes the right of legitimate government to resort to the death penalty, but it directly challenges the appropriateness of government’s doing so in a society that is capable of ensuring the public safety. If non-lethal means are sufficient to protect people’s safety from an aggressor, we believe that public authority should limit itself to such means, because they are more in keeping with the concrete conditions of the common good, and with the dignity of the human person. Since 1987, non-lethal means sufficient to protect the people’s safety has been available in Maryland capital cases in the form of life-without-parole sentences.

I echo the statement of my brother bishops of Maryland who, in their 2000 pastoral letter, “A Prayer for Mercy,” said, “This teaching [justice-with-mercy] is directly applicable to the subject of this letter: Our continuing opposition to the death penalty, our hope that you will reflect with us on the matter, and our invitation to work with us to promote respect for human life...all human life...every human life, even the life of one who has committed the grievous sine of murder. We know that for some, a justice-with-mercy ethic that avoids resort to the death penalty is not easily embraced. We pray that they will come to realize that we cannot defend life by taking life. We pray that they will come to view the death penalty as a further manifestation of the culture of death that haunts our country, as a contributor to that lethal culture.”

With merciful hearts, I invite you to join me in praying for all who have been victimized by violence, especially those family members and loved ones of victims and survivors, as well as those who cause violence and for those in positions of public authority.

As we proceed on our Lenten journey, we prepare to call to mind Christ’s own

execution and the mercy he requested on behalf of those who crucified him, "Father, forgive them" (Luke 23:24). Let us open our hearts and minds to the assurance of our Lord's mercy, as it was conveyed to us through St. Faustina: "Before I come as the first Judge, I am coming as the King of Mercy. My mercy is so great that no mind, be it of man or angel, will be able to fathom it throughout all eternity."