

# Jury duty: Reflections on my day in court

In the Gospel of John, at the trial of Jesus, Pontius Pilate asks sarcastically, "Truth? What is truth?"

That's the question we must ask in any trial. Recently, I had the privilege, and the pain, of sitting on a jury. As you may know, if you live in Baltimore City you are called frequently for jury duty. In the many times I was called in the past to report to the courthouse, I never actually sat on a jury. Despite my pleas to the lawyers and the judge that I had prior commitments (counseling, Mass at Oak Crest, etc.), I was still seated on a jury in a trial.

In the past, I heard someone describe a jury trial not as a search for justice, but as an effort to determine who the better liar is, and who has the better lawyer! As idealistic and as positive as I try to stay, the line is not that far from the truth. It was profoundly discouraging to hear people, under oath, making absolutely contradictory statements. Someone was clearly lying.

I commented to someone that now I know I'm supposed to be a priest. I love the role of the forgiver and healer, not the role of judge or jury.

While I had grumbled about being on a jury, and while I disliked having to cancel my commitments, I did eventually surrender to reality. I had to be here. Why not allow myself to be fully present to an experience that had never come before and may never come again.

Fortunately, it really was a good group of fellow jurors. I, frankly, was impressed with the wisdom of the jury system, a trial by peers. There was so much common sense, so much practical wisdom, that the truth seemed evident to all of us. While I would probably say that the guilty side had the better lawyer, the guilty side clearly did not have good liars. A wise person who specialized in interrogation told me years ago: "Tell the truth. It's too hard to remember your lies." The contradictions seemed fairly obvious in this case.

Throughout the trial, I found myself praying for wisdom and right judgment. During, and subsequent to the trial, I found myself praying for the participants. There were sad stories, tragic choices - lives that seemed to be headed nowhere. I prayed that God could bring healing, hope and new life for all concerned.

While I had grumbled about being on a jury, as I left the courthouse, I did feel good that I had been a part, a very humble part, of the justice system. The jury system is much like democracy. Democracy is a terrible form of government, until you compare it to the alternatives! Then it's the best. The jury system is clearly an imperfect form of justice, until you compare it to the alternatives. As you look around the world at people being stoned, judges being killed and terrorists creating chaos, you quickly see how blessed we are to be where we are in life.

Earlier in the day, we were shown a film depicting early forms of "justice." One part of the film showed how innocence or guilt was determined in the Middle Ages. If you were accused of a serious crime, you were taken and thrown in the lake. If your body floated to the surface, you were guilty. If your body sank, you were innocent! Despite flaws in our current system, the old saying is true: "You've come a long way, baby!"

So, having had my "day in court," I now think to pray each day for the courts. The prayer we said before each class in the seminary, I now pray for the courts: "Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful, and kindle in them the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit, and they will be created, and you shall renew the face of the earth! O God, who by the light of thy Holy Spirit, did instruct the hearts of your faithful, grant us by that same Spirit to be truly wise, and ever to rejoice in his comfort through Christ Our Lord. Amen."