Life Matters: The Death Penalty

We live in a culture of death: a culture torn by abortion and euthanasia, by wanton violence, war, murder, and hatred. Life is treated as if it were cheap, and many are the threats to the dignity of human life. Yet we believe that all human life is from God, and he alone is the master of life and of death. Blessed John Paul II made the defense of the dignity of all human life the centerpiece of his pontificate.

The death penalty presents itself as a complex moral issue because of the apparently conflicting demands of justice on one hand and charity on the other. Some crimes are so serious and so heinous that they seem to cry out for the ultimate punishment of death. And yet the Gospel message is forever one of forgiveness, of reconciliation, of committed charity toward all without exceptions.

Christian teaching since the time of Christ has never considered the death penalty in itself intrinsically evil. The Fifth Commandment which instructs us “thou shall not kill,” has always been understood to refer to innocent human life, and not to those guilty of the most terrible crimes.

Christians have always believed in the right of self-defense because every person has an obligation to guard his own life as a gift from God. And society clearly has a right to defend itself from aggressors, both external (by means of war as a last resort) and internal (such as murderers, serial killers, terrorists, and those guilty of treason). The question for a Christian is not so much whether there has been validity for the death penalty, but whether it should or should not be imposed today.

And today it is clear that the death penalty no longer serves a useful purpose in protecting the sanctity of human life. Perhaps once it was the only way society could protect itself from those who would destroy the life of others, but today in most modern nations, judicial and penal systems have improved so much that they effectively remove further danger to innocent people by incarcerating the perpetrators of criminal violence. Imprisonment is effective in removing the offender from society. Importantly, it allows time for repentance and rehabilitation. And the one sure result of executing prisoners is to make us as a people more vengeful—seeking retribution and satisfying our outrage at the violent crime by more violence.

As Christians we are asked to visit the imprisoned, minister to their needs, and encourage them to repent and change. We should never lose our conviction that even the worst offenders are our brothers and sisters in Christ, who offers forgiveness and eternal life to all. That process of reform takes time, often quite a long time. The death penalty takes that opportunity for conversion away.

One noteworthy example of a delayed conversion began with a rapist’s brutal attack on an eleven-year-old girl. When she resisted him, the twenty-year-old assailant stabbed her fourteen times and left her to die. Had he not been a minor himself, he would have received the death penalty for his heinous crime. Instead, his sentence was 30 years’ imprisonment. During his first three years behind bars, the murderer remained unrepentant and even hostile to a visiting priest. But after a visit from the local bishop and a dream in which his victim forgave him, he repented and resolved to lead an exemplary life. After serving his full sentence, he sought the forgiveness of his victim’s family and the parish community before becoming a lay brother of the Order of Capuchin Franciscans. By now you may have guessed that his victim was St. Maria Goretti, and his name was Alessandro Serenelli. He later had the unique honor of attending the canonization of the child saint whom he had martyred. Had Alessandro been executed, the story would have had a tragically different ending.

Today, thanks to the ministry in prisons by Catholics and other Christians, countless inmates serving life sentences have allowed God to transform their lives. They lead Bible study groups, pray with fellow inmates, and counsel them to lead lives of virtue, placing all their trust in the Lord’s merciful love.

The death penalty may make us think that we have eliminated a problem—but a person, even a criminal, is never a problem to be destroyed. It lulls us into thinking we have addressed the problem, but we have not really dealt with the deeper issues of what has gone wrong in society when violent crime is so widespread. Death is an all too simple “solution” for a much more complex set of problems we need to face as a society. There are as many

“If bloodless means are sufficient to defend human lives against an aggressor and to protect public order and the safety of persons, public authority must limit itself to such means, because they better correspond to the concrete conditions of the common good and are more in conformity to the dignity of the human person.”

(Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 2267)
degrees of guilt and culpability as there are crimes, yet the
death penalty imposes one definitive, final, indiscriminate
punishment on all, halting the action of the Holy Spirit on
the condemned person’s soul for eternity.

The nature and extent of the punishment
must be carefully evaluated and decided
upon, and ought not go to the extreme of
executing the offender except in cases of
absolute necessity: In other words, when it
would not be possible otherwise to defend
society. Today however, as a result of
steady improvements in the organization of
the penal system, such cases are very rare if
not practically nonexistent.
(Blessed John Paul II, The Gospel of
Life, no. 56).

We know all too well the inadequacies of our society. In a
real sense our society’s dysfunctions breed our criminals
through poverty, fatherlessness, discrimination, injustice,
lack of opportunity, and hopelessness. How much of the
gang violence linked to the drug trade is occasioned by the
addiction of the whole society to illegal drugs we use to
escape reality? And many of our social pathologies make
us more prone to crime and violence. We don’t fix those
problems by executing people. The death penalty just
aggravates the injustices we have not yet been able to
overcome.

Despite the virtues of our justice system, we have to
honestly admit it also has serious limitations. With
scandalous frequency, people on death row have later been
shown to be innocent of the crime for which they were
convicted. DNA testing and other conclusive forms of
evidence have resulted in the exoneration of well over 100
death row inmates. Nor can we overlook the fact that
persons with mental illness or intellectual disabilities are
put to death, despite their lesser degrees of culpability. But
the death penalty once applied is irrevocable, and human
life cannot be given back once eliminated.

As time goes on our society seems increasingly reluctant to
impose the death penalty, as it is imposed far less
frequently now. There seems to be a growing
consciousness that there is something wrong about using
violence to discourage violence, that it serves no good
purpose. We would be better as a people if we were to end
it altogether. Many families of victims, too, are hopeful of
seeing an end to the death penalty, feeling that no
punishment can bring back their loved one and that it is
better to forgive and hope for a change on the part of the
criminal.

People instinctively know it is better to let the offender
remain in prison and, hopefully over time, repent of his
crime and change his life. To that end, the goal of Christian
prison ministry was beautifully expressed by Pope Benedict
XVI:

“Chaplains and their collaborators are called to be
heralds of God’s infinite compassion and forgiveness.
… They are entrusted with the weighty task of helping
the incarcerated rediscover a sense of purpose so that,
with God’s grace, they can reform their lives, be
reconciled with their families and friends, and, insofar
as possible, assume the responsibilities and duties
which will enable them to conduct upright and honest
lives” (Address to the International Commission of
Catholic Prison Pastoral Care, Sept. 6, 2007).

This is the way of Christian mercy and reconciliation, and a
challenge to all who call themselves Christian.

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