

Reflection for morning prayer
Catholic Social Ministry Gathering 2020

Considering the invitation from Deuteronomy, I took a look at the Catechism of the Catholic Church which St. John Paul II gave to all of us who worked for the Holy See at Christmas 1992 in its Italian version. In n. 2267 we read that if non-lethal means were sufficient to protect human life from the aggressor and protect public order and security, the authorities should limit themselves to these methods in favor of the common good and better conformed to the dignity of the human person.

Clearly in the USA we have the means to protect society without resorting to the death penalty. Our concern for all life should motivate our willingness to defend life from conception to natural death. Our coherence on the issue makes our defense more cogent and takes from our hands the notion that we can decide who should live and who should die.

As you saw, in 1999 St. John Paul II arrived in St. Louis on 26 January. Upon arrival he quoted *Evangelium Vitae*, his document on life issues wherein he illustrates how many issues are a part of the struggle to defend human life. Abortion, euthanasia, poverty, sub-standard education, the death penalty, and more all threaten human life. The challenge is to renew our commitment to the human person and choose life for all.

So much of what the Catholic Church in our country has done reflects that commitment. Think about Catholic hospitals, schools, social agencies, outreach to rural areas, CRS, and so much more. Certainly, the first bishops were desperate to care for a largely immigrant Church, but stability and social acceptance will never excuse us from taking to heart the Gospel message and serving as missionary disciples in our own day. That will always mean fidelity beyond the comfort zone on issues involving life, service and advocacy for the poor, and a deep commitment to the needy outside our borders.

It will mean an exemplary role in identifying and healing the traces of racism in our society. I am sure in this group that most of you have read our pastoral letter against racism: "Open Wide Our Hearts: An Enduring Call to Love." Several months ago I participated in a listening session on racism in the neighboring diocese of Arlington. It was an eye-opener as to how decisions can be perceived and how attentive we must be to the subtle traces of racism in our attitudes, decisions, and positions.

It would be naïve not to see how racial bias is embedded in criminal justice as well as other forms of oppression. Statistics show the imbalance and disproportion in those who are prosecuted for offenses and populate our prisons.

Capital punishment is one symptom of a system in which people of color, the poor, those with mental illness, and those who did not benefit from a good educational system can be confined in a neighborhood of dead ends. It does not have to be that way.

As a student in Rome in 1981, I remember hearing the faint voice of St. John Paul II when he came out of the operating room. He could barely speak, but his first words were of pardon for the one who had tried to kill him.

The other week two British bishops talked to me about how so often in their country military service represents the only opportunity to escape from neighborhoods dominated by gangs and the drug culture. Even in the USA and our current thriving job market, the military still offers hope for advancement and a new life to many whose other opportunities are limited.

When Pope Benedict XVI came to our shores in 2008, he reminded us that we are a people of hope. Consequently, we lead different lives. Sometimes the quest for integration has forced us into complacency or uniformity with the prevalent culture. Cardinal Hickey once told me that the Friday abstinence from meat, in addition to being a sound penitential practice, also gave us an identity; it set us apart.

Regardless of what we eat, we cannot lose that identity, which is an expression of our faith. With Pope Francis, we recognize that “we cannot uphold an ideal of holiness that would ignore injustice in a world where some revel, spend with abandon and live only for the latest consumer goods, even as others look on from afar, living their entire lives in abject poverty.”¹ St. Paul VI reminded us that people will listen to teachers if they are witnesses and you and I are charged to be effective witnesses to life in our society. May your days in Washington be a time to witness in such a way that you are heard and heeded as effective messengers of “life and justice for all”

¹ Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 101.