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Seven Truths About the Death Penalty

conform to God's will and ways. "If we are to support a society which kills through the death penalty, for instance, we must know why it does so and be satisfied that its reasons are reconcilable with the tenets of our faith. Are they – when society kills for vengeance? 'Vengeance is mine,' says the Lord. What do you say?" (Hon. Richard L. Nygaard, U.S. Third Circuit Court of Appeals in *America*, October 8, 1994 issue)

Christianity challenges us to resist and strive to change unjust, immoral laws, towards a society guided by Jesus' grace and mercy. The U.S. Catholic Bishops teach us that "our faith is profoundly social," and call "American Catholics, as both believers and citizens, to use the resources of our faith and the opportunities of this democracy to help shape a society more respectful of life, dignity and rights of the human person..." (U.S. Bishops, *Communities of Salt and Light*, 1993)

"Christians have a responsibility to be a ferment, to be prophets. This includes calling the state to higher standards of behavior...The death penalty raises many moral issues, including: Does the death penalty enhance or demean the value of life? Is the death penalty a necessary way to express society's moral condemnation of murder?" (Dr. Howard Zehr, Mennonite Central Committee)

Finally, moving toward a more personal reflection on the death penalty, Zehr challenges us: "...we also need to find those roots of violence and injustice that are in us all. We need to acknowledge our own complicity and failure, that we have all sinned and fallen short of what we could and should be. We are all offenders and all victims. We all need redemption. Only a foundation in that realization will allow us to build a future where violence will be unnecessary."

TRUTH #1: EACH PERSON IS CREATED IN GOD'S IMAGE

Scripture

"God created man and woman in his image; in the divine image he created them; male and female he created them. And God looked at everything that he had made, and He found it very good." Genesis 1: 26, 31

Teaching

"Even in the midst of difficulties and uncertainties, every person sincerely open to truth and goodness can, by the light of reason and the hidden action of grace, come to recognize, in the natural law written in the heart, the sacred value of human life from its very beginning until its end, and can affirm the right of every human being to have this primary good respected to the highest degree. In a special way, believers in Christ must defend and promote this right." "Life, especially human life, belongs only to God: For this reason, whoever attacks human life in some way attacks God Himself." "Not even a murderer loses his personal dignity, and God himself pledges to guarantee this." (*Gospel of Life*, Pope John Paul II)

"Those who commit crimes do not give up their human dignity, and those who administer justice must not deny this God-given dignity." (Catholic Bishops of New York State, 1982)

"Remember, what you do to these men, you do to God." (Mother Teresa, speaking about the death penalty in the U.S.)

Reflection

How do I come to own the truth that this Scripture and these quotes proclaim? Do I believe that each person is made in God's image and likeness? Do I see God's image in the one I consider my greatest enemy? Do I let another's sinful actions block my awareness of this most basic Catholic teaching? The truth is that God's dignity is there. How can I open my eyes? How can I see the truth of this dignity even in the murderer? Do I want to see it? Like the blind man, I ask Jesus to open my eyes that I might see. I want to see him and know the truth of His reflection in each person.

TRUTH #2: WE ARE CALLED TO MOVE BEYOND VENGEANCE

Scripture

“You have heard it was said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But now I tell you, do not take revenge on someone who wrongs you.”

Matthew 5: 38-42

Teaching

“Our society should not flinch from contemplating the suffering that violent crime brings. Recognition of this suffering should not lead to demands for vengeance.” (U.S. Bishops, *Statement on Capital Punishment*, 1980)

“Our elected representatives must once and for all decide what is more productive and effective public policy; vengeance and retribution, or addressing the root problems of crime and disorder in our neighborhoods.” (Most Reverend Howard Hubbard, Bishop of Albany, 1992)

Reflection

There was once a man who just wouldn't keep quiet. He spoke out for Jesus. This was a threat to the people and their customs. So the leaders bribed men to falsely accuse him. The crowd got furious, angry and violent. Some in the crowd killed him. The man was St. Stephen, who while dying said, “Lord! Do not remember this sin against them!” One of the killers was Saul – who became St. Paul.

What would have happened if Saul had been captured and executed prior to becoming St. Paul? Do I really accept the faith conversions in Scripture? Do I want people converted – even if they are my enemies? What role does conversion play in my Christianity? Can the belief in conversion and desire for revenge co-exist?



TRUTH #7: CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING CHALLENGES THE MORALITY OF CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

Scripture

“Jesus answered Pilate, ‘You would have no power over me if it had not been given to you from above.’” John 19:11

“Peter and the apostles said..., ‘We must obey God rather than humankind.’” Acts 5:29

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, my ways are not your ways – it is Yahweh who speaks. Yes, the heavens are as high above earth as my ways are above your ways...” Isaiah 55:8-9

Teaching

“Abolition of the death penalty would promote values that are important to us as citizens and as Christians. It is a manifestation of our freedom as moral persons striving for a just society. It is also a challenge to us as a people to find ways of dealing with criminals that manifest intelligence and compassion rather than power and vengeance. We urge our brothers and sisters in Christ to remember the teaching of Jesus who called us to be reconciled with those who have injured us (Mt. 5:43-45) and pray for forgiveness for our sins ‘as we forgive those who have sinned against us’ (Mt. 6:12). We call on you to contemplate the crucified Christ who set us the supreme example of forgiveness and of triumph of compassionate love.” (U.S. Catholic Bishops, *Statement on Capital Punishment*, 1980)

“As Christians, we seek guidance for our moral decisions in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Reflecting on the Gospel, we realize that there is nothing in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ which can be construed as being in support of capital punishment....The challenging message of Jesus is that not only are the lives of the ones we love to be valued, but also the lives of our enemies. What stronger determination of the value of life could a society give than by sparing the lives of those who have taken life?” (Bishop Daniel Reilly, Diocese of Norwich, CT, 1990)

Reflection

We do not practice our Christian faith in a vacuum – our faith calls us to bring its values to bear on society's laws and policies, which do not always

Increasingly, our society looks to violent measures to deal with some of our most difficult social problems – millions of abortions to address problem pregnancies, advocacy of euthanasia and assisted suicide to cope with the burdens of age and illness, and increased reliance on the death penalty to deal with crime. We are tragically turning to violence in the search for quick and easy answers to complex human problems. A society which destroys its children, abandons its old, and relies on vengeance fails fundamental moral tests. Violence is not the solution; it is the most clear sign of our failures. We are losing our respect for human life. How do we teach the young to curb their violence when we embrace it as the solution to social problems?” (U.S. Catholic Bishops, *Confronting A Culture of Violence*, 1994)

“In modern society we have come to equate justice with the process of punishing those who have broken the law. Thus we hear the phrase, ‘The State vs. John Doe.’ Crime is seen as an offense against a law, not as an injury against a person. The testimony of the Scripture, however, is that justice pertains to righteousness; that is the righting of relationships, the recovery of community. Restorative justice, the Biblical definition of justice, then does not emphasize retaliatory punishment – i.e. isolation from community, but views justice as a process of mending the fabric of a torn community; the object of justice is wholeness: for the victim, the community, and for the offender. The outcome of Biblical justice is not weighed according to who wins and who loses but is judged by the degree of responsibilities assumed, needs met, and healing attained.” (Dr. Howard Zehr, Mennonite Central Committee)

Reflection

Biblical justice does not disregard evil or suggest a “soft on crime” approach. It allows that there may well be acts, such as murder, which for the safeguarding of community, require the offender to be kept at a safe distance from society. If, however, we believe that God’s grace reaches out to all, can we see that God’s community of grace, the Church, must therefore also be present to those who are isolated, even those who face death? When an execution is pending what song rings in our heart? Is it the executioner’s song of triumph in victory, or the lament of God calling us to be present, to realize our connection to the condemned?

TRUTH #3: WE ARE CALLED TO END THE CYCLE OF VIOLENCE

Scripture

“So if you are about to offer your gift to God at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar, go at once and make peace with your brother or sister and then come back and offer your gift to God.” Matthew 5: 23-24

Teaching

“We cannot teach that killing is wrong by killing. We have reached the point in one very visible case where a jury has urged the execution of the person who murdered the physician who was destroying unborn children. The cycle of violence diminishes all of us—especially children.” (U.S. Catholic Bishops, *Confronting a Culture of Violence*, 1994)

“Mindful that hate is evil and a dangerous force, we too often think of what it does to the person hated. But there is another side we must never overlook. Hate is just as injurious to the person who hates. Like an unchecked cancer, hate corrodes the personality and eats away its vital unity.” (Martin Luther King, Jr.)

Reflection

If I would decide to act in accordance with these quotations, what would that mean? Would there be any change in my life? In those around me? What does it mean to say “violence breeds violence?” Are there non-physical forms of violence that lead to physical violence? Are there some times when I feel “getting even” is justified? Is this perhaps at the core of my position on the death penalty? If yes, how does that fit in with the above? Why didn’t Jesus try to get even with his accusers and executioners?

TRUTH #4: WE ARE CALLED TO FORGIVENESS AND HEALING

Scripture

“Forgive us our trespasses even (in the same measure*) as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Matthew 6:14-15, Luke 11:4 *Added for emphasis and faithfulness to the original language.

“When you stand to pray, forgive anyone against whom you have a grievance so that your heavenly Father may in turn forgive you your faults.” Matthew 11:25

“See to it that no person falls away from the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up through which many may become defiled.” Hebrews 12:15

Teaching

“As pastors, we are keenly aware of the experience of our people. Innocent victims who survive, as well as victims’ families and friends, suffer ongoing trauma because of the violence inflicted upon them and their loved ones. Moreover, frequently little or no attention is given to the plight of victims. There is a need to examine proposals that seek to provide support, compensation and healing for victims and their families. We have shared their pain and anxiety. Our parishes have buried victims who are members of their communities, have counseled their families, and have undertaken a variety of efforts to prevent violence and promote reconciliation and healing. In contrast, death penalty cases generally allow no opportunities for reconciliation, and healing is delayed, if not made almost impossible.” (Catholic Bishops in Illinois, *Statement on Capital Punishment* (revised) February, 1996.)

“I was an 8 year old when my father was murdered. It is almost impossible to describe the pain of losing a parent to a senseless murder. And in the aftermath, it is similarly impossible to quiet the confusion: ‘Why him? Why this? Why me?’ But even as a child, one thing was clear to me: I didn’t want the killer, in turn, to be killed. I remember lying in bed and praying, ‘Please God. Please don’t take his life, too.’ I saw nothing that could be accomplished in the loss of one life being answered with the loss of another. And I knew, far too vividly, the anguish that would spread

Teaching

The above verses illustrate God’s desire to restore individuals and community after a sin has been committed. In that time, community was held as the highest value. Acts which threatened the fabric of community were therefore considered the most serious offenses. In the story of the woman caught in adultery, an act which threatened the peace and harmony of the community and therefore by law a capital offense, Jesus called upon the gathered community to examine their own consciences. While it was within the parameters of the law for them to give the woman the death penalty, Jesus asked them to reflect upon the times that they too had fractured community. He also calls the woman to reorient her life and actions so that she would no longer be a threat to community. The passage from Hebrews makes it clear that our God is a Holy God who demands righteousness and disciplines us when we fail to live out this call. At the same time, however, it is clear that God’s discipline is not destructive in nature; rather its aim is to bring wholeness to the offender. Matthew’s Gospel recognizes that there are indeed circumstances which call for removing offenders from community because they pose an ongoing threat. The intent of removal, however, is not so that the person be diminished in any way. We must remember this is Jesus talking. Therefore, we must ask the question, “How did Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors?” The answer is he called them to become members of the community. Thus, we are to understand his instructions to the church as a command to reach out and re-evangelize those who have by their willful intention caused severe harm to the community. (Thomas L. Garlitz, *Peace and Social Justice Ministry*, Joliet, IL)

“The efforts of the state to curb the spread of behavior harmful to people’s rights and to the basic rules of civil society correspond to the requirements of safeguarding the common good. Legitimate public authority has the right and the duty to inflict punishment proportionate to the gravity of the offense. Punishment has the primary aim of redressing the disorder introduced by the offense. When it is willingly accepted by the guilty party, it assumes the value of expiation. Punishment then, in addition to defending public order and protecting people’s safety, has a medicinal purpose: As far as possible, it must contribute to the correction of the guilty party.” *The New Catholic Catechism*

“Assuming that the guilty party’s identity and responsibility have been fully determined, the traditional teaching of the church does not exclude recourse to the death penalty, if this is the only possible way of effectively defending human lives against the unjust aggressor.” *The New Catholic Catechism*

TRUTH #6: WE ARE CALLED TO VIEW CRIME AND PUNISHMENT IN THE LIGHT OF THE GOSPEL

Scripture

“Then the scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery and made her stand in the middle. They said to him, ‘Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?’ Jesus bent down and began to write on the ground with his finger. But when they continued asking him, he straightened up and said to them, ‘Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.’ Again he bent down and wrote on the ground. And in response, they went away one by one, beginning with the elders. So he was left alone with the woman before him. Then Jesus straightened up and said to her, ‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ She replied, ‘No one, sir.’ Then Jesus said, ‘Neither do I condemn you. Go, from now on do not sin any more.’” John 8:3-11

“My child, do not disdain the discipline of the Lord or lose heart when reproved by him; for whom the Lord loves, he disciplines; he scourges every child he acknowledges. Endure your trials as discipline; God treats you as sons and daughters. For what child is there whom the father does not discipline? If you are without discipline, in which all have shared, you are not children but bastards. Besides this, we have had our earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them. Should we not (then) submit all the more to the Father of spirits and live? They disciplined us for a short time as seemed right to them, but he does so for our benefit, in order that we may share his holiness. At the time, all discipline seems a cause not for joy but for pain, yet later it brings the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who are trained by it. So strengthen your drooping hands and your weak knees. Make straight paths for your feet, that what is lame may not be dislocated but healed.” Hebrews 12:5-13

“If your brother sins (against you), go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won over your brother. If he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, so that every fact may be established on the testimony of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell the church. If he refuses to listen even to the church, then treat him as you would a Gentile or a tax collector.” Matthew 18:15-17

through another family -- another set of parents, children, brothers, and sisters thrown into grief.” (Kerry Kennedy)

Maria Goretti, a young teenager, was approached by her 19-year-old cousin, Alessandro, asking her for sex. She refused. A few days later, he tried to rape her and she fought him off. “No, Alessandro, it is a sin. God would be displeased!” Frustrated, he stabbed her, again and again. That night, as Maria lay dying in the hospital, her pastor brought her communion and anointed her. He reminded her how Jesus prayed for his murderers while they were murdering him: “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” Then he said: “Maria, can you forgive your murderer?” Maria answered, “I have already forgiven him, and may God forgive him too, because one day I want him to be in paradise with me!”

Reflection

In what ways could harboring bitterness and unforgiving affect us emotionally, spiritually, socially and even physically? The Scripture calls us to forgive, but is it humanly possible to forgive perpetrators of heinous and despicable crimes? Or does the occasion of great evil, while of course never intended by God, nevertheless become an occasion for God to minister grace and conversion in vast measure to those who in faith cry out to God for help?

“Lord I am in pain; a wound in my heart caused by another is the source of this suffering. That heart of mine, Lord of Hearts, is filled with anger so that I am unable to be loving and caring. I want to return injury for injury, pain for pain, and so can not desire to forgive the other. Lord, You and I both know that such an attitude is wrong; yet it is very real and its pain overflows into my whole life. Before I can come to the point of wanting to forgive I must find an antidote for the poison of this attitude. Lord, I need Your help for my feelings are confused, and so I need to find some order among them. Lead me, forgiving Lord, to the graces of healing and the power of forgiveness, so that though I now feel grief and death within my soul, I may one day be resurrected to a fuller life.” (*Restorative Justice Liturgy Resource*, Mennonite Central Committee, Akron, PA)

TRUTH #5: WE ARE CALLED TO LIVE BY A CONSISTENT LIFE ETHIC

Scripture

“... from each person in regard to all human beings I will demand an accounting for human life.” Genesis 9:5

“... I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live, by loving the Lord, your God, heeding God’s voice, and holding fast to God. For that will mean life for you...” Deut. 30: 19-20

Teaching

“... abolition of the death penalty is further testimony to our conviction ... that God is indeed the Lord of Life. It is a testimony which removes a certain ambiguity which might otherwise affect the witness that we wish to give to the sanctity of human life in all its stages. We do not wish to equate the situation of criminals convicted of capital offenses with the condition of the innocent unborn or of the defenseless aged or infirm, but we do believe that the defense of life is strengthened by eliminating exercise of a judicial authorization to take human life.” (U.S. Catholic Bishops, *Statement on Capital Punishment*, 1980)

“We believe human life is so precious that the state should not take the life of any person, even one who has taken another life. We believe a determined, though compassionate, response to crime that forgoes the violence of the death penalty is more consistent with respect for all human life. It will better protect the rights of all persons.” (Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, Testimony before the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee, September 28, 1989)

“We have a very consistent commitment as church to defending the sanctity of human life in all its stages. We struggle mightily against abortion; we have a commitment and concern for the poor; we deplore racial and sexual discrimination and the self-destructive use of drugs. Our position against the use of the death penalty falls into that continuum.” (Archbishop John Roach, Archdiocese of St. Paul-Minneapolis, 1992)

“It will be interesting to see if the Pope’s strong opposition to the death penalty in his recent encyclical, *Gospel of Life*, has any effect on Catholic people in this country...Will Catholic people continue to be selective on pro-life issues or will Catholic voices be heard with equal volume against the death penalty as against abortion? Those who have tried to unravel the threads of the seamless garment now have the task of weaving it together again...An ethic that is inconsistent allows for exceptions according to one’s personal beliefs. A consistent ethic, however, establishes a principle that goes beyond personal feelings. The Pope’s statement on the death penalty tightens the weave of the seamless garment.” (Bishop Joseph Imesch, Diocese of Joliet, IL in *Catholic Peace Voice*, Summer 1995)

Reflection

The concept of a consistent ethic of life challenges us to reflect on the moral principles underlying the cause and the life issues which we find ourselves committed to supporting. Is this something I need to do? Is there an inner moral relationship between a life issue I favor and another I might oppose?

“Lord of all life, when our hearts may be hardened by fear or vengeance toward persons convicted of violent crimes, help us to seek your way of loving forgiveness. As we pray and work for the healing of victims, and for ways to lessen violence in our society, help us to be “pro-life” toward all persons, and leave judgement in your hands. God of Justice, strengthen our conviction, deepen our prayer, and prepare us for the challenge of a consistent ethic of life. We ask these graces through Jesus, Your Son, Himself a victim of state execution. Amen.”



