

of death penalty supporters drops to 36%.) We instinctively know that in putting someone else to death, we are somehow killing a part of ourselves. It is for this reason that the Diocese holds a prayer vigil at the time of every execution in Illinois, and calls upon every parish to include the person to be executed, along with the victims of their violence, in the prayers and petitions. We want our people to know at least the name of the person being put to death. I believe that more Catholics are coming to realize their connection to those on death row. I am especially encouraged by the number of young people who come to the diocesan prayer vigils and by the report of St. Francis High School students organizing a prayer vigil.

I spoke of Karla Fay Tucker's conversion (which it should be made clear was no recent conversion, but of over a dozen years) to Evangelical Christianity. It is important for us to realize that in the State of Illinois, not only have we had several men executed who also experienced conversions to Evangelical Christianity, we have had several Catholics executed, and their final meal included the Eucharist. As we partake of Eucharist this Sunday, let us remember our connection to those on death row and in prison. Those prisoners who have died in the faith are now with Christ. If we deny our connection to them, then we have failed

to discern our oneness in the Body of Christ in Eucharist. And may God have mercy upon our souls.

“Blessed are the Merciful, for they will be shown Mercy.”

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The Execution of Karla Fay Tucker: Nothing Exceptional

by Thomas L. Garlitz



Despite all the media attention on the fate of Karla Fay Tucker, there was nothing exceptional about her death row story. Aside from being an articulate and attractive woman, her story of a changed life on death row is not at all uncommon. What was exceptional about her story is that many people came to know her as a real person. And knowing her they did not want her to die.

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The fact is that many people on death row, when finally taken away from the drugs and alcohol, isolated from the chaos that was their life, and forced into an almost monastic situation, begin a process of looking inward, finding themselves and many times thus finding God. This is the story we are not usually told. Prisons not only isolate the criminal from society, they isolate society from the criminal. And because of this isolation we all suffer in ways that we do not really comprehend. I believe that is why Jesus includes the call to visit the prisoner as part of the examination of whether we truly know God. We, each and every human being, are created in God's image. This creation not only speaks to our individual human dignity, but because of the triune nature of our God, it is also profoundly social. Because, through God's image, we are social beings; we can never truly separate someone from the rest of society or society from the individual. We remain connected and if we do not realize that connection, the image of God in humankind is diminished. Society suffers.

The irony of Karla Fay Tucker's story is that many of her advocates, mainly Fundamentalist Christians, were and

remain advocates of the death penalty. It put many in a quandary, how could they be pro-Karla and pro-death penalty? It is this quandary that I hope leads many Christians, be they Fundamentalist or Catholic, to reconsider their position on the death penalty. Christian Media Mogul, the Rev. Pat Robertson, was one of the most outspoken advocates for Karla Fay Tucker, and yet he continues to believe in the death penalty. The problem with the death penalty, according to Robertson, is that it is not administered quickly enough to be a deterrent. And yet, had Karla Fay Tucker been quickly executed, she may not have had the time to come to her dramatic and deep conversion, which drew Robertson's interest in the first place.

This inconsistency in beliefs is not exclusive to Fundamentalists; many Catholics, while claiming to be pro-life on issues of abortion and euthanasia, are strong supporters of the death penalty. As Tucker said in her final interview with CBN shortly before her execution, "Life is precious, and if we believe life is precious in abortion, or in mercy killing, shouldn't we believe life is precious in the death penalty?" Whether we hold to our incorrect beliefs due to a faulty biblical hermeneutic, as is the case with the Fundamentalist, or because we are shaped all too often more by the general culture of violence than by our Church's teaching, as is the case among Catholics, I hope the life and testimony of Karla Fay Tucker might cause us all to re-evaluate our thinking. By all accounts Tucker

became a person of great depth and love. She took responsibility for her actions and placed herself at the mercy of God. As she said in an interview with Newsweek magazine, "But I know the value of human life now. I can't believe in the death penalty or abortion or mercy killings. I've been in a position to take life. I know how horrible it is." As the scriptures say, "she who is forgiven much, loves much."

While it is true that Catholics reflect general society in belief in the death penalty, I believe there is reason for hope. That hope will come by putting a human face on each person in prison and on death row. While statistics show that 75% of Americans believe in the death penalty in principle, when asked about the death penalty in the case of the most heinous murderer in the history of our country, Timothy McVeigh, that number dropped to 67%. Why? Because people saw his face. They came to know him. And even though the person they came to know had committed great evil, they saw him as human, realized in some way their connection to him, and could not put him to death. If the percentage of support for the death penalty drops in the worst case scenario, we can see why there was such a great cry for mercy in the case of Karla Fay Tucker. (When given a choice between the death penalty and life in prison without the possibility of parole, the number