



A CATHOLIC RESPONSE TO THE DEATH PENALTY

Abortion, euthanasia, domestic abuse, gang related violence, terrorism, murder, mass shootings, expressions of hatred or racism and other acts contrary to the dignity of persons...all of these are a cry out for justice. Yet, we are a people of hope, and St Paul reminds us that “in hope we are saved.” (Rom8:24)

We know that all human life is a gift from God, a gift we are to protect. Our response, then, to a culture in which hostility towards others is commonplace, in which killing is often considered a legitimate solution to social problems, is to both live and proclaim a gospel of life, hope and mercy.

Catholic teaching against the death penalty is both persuasive and eminently pro-life. For people committed to upholding the sanctity of life, the death penalty can present a challenge. It begins with the

affirmation that human dignity applies to every human being, to victims as well as those who have committed crimes against life. Our teaching also holds that recourse to the death penalty may be justified only under the most narrow circumstances, namely, if it is the “only possible way to effectively defend human life against the unjust aggressor.”(CCC#2267) The teaching reminds us that if non-lethal means are capable of protecting society, these are preferable as “more in keeping with the concrete circumstances of the common good and more in conformity with the dignity of the human person”. (CCC, no. 2267)

St John Paul II was instrumental in challenging the world to reconsider the use of the death penalty. In his 1995 encyclical “*Evangelium Vitae*”, he explained that, “The Gospel of God’s love for man, the Gospel of the dignity of the person and the Gospel of Life are a single and indivisible Gospel (no. 2). Quoting the Second Vatican Council’s “*Gaudium et Spes* (no 22), “By His incarnation the Son of God has united himself in some fashion with every man,” adding that, “This saving event reveals to humanity not only the boundless love of God...but also

the incomparable value of every human person.” (EV). John Paul presents the story of Cain and Able to illustrate that God’s mercy embraces even a murderer. Despite Cain’s deliberate killing of his brother, despite his lack of remorse, his arrogance, his lies to God and utter callousness about what he had done (“I do not know where Cain is. Am I my brother’s keeper?” Gen:4), God nevertheless refuses to take Cain’s life as punishment. But he does not leave the crime unpunished. He tells Cain that he will not be able to grow crops and that he will be a fugitive and wanderer on the earth. Although Cain is spared execution, justice requires that he live the rest of his earthly life alone and outcast, but with time to reflect on his crime, to perhaps feel remorse and at last seek forgiveness and reconciliation with God. John Paul wrote, “Not even a murderer loses his personal dignity, and God himself pledges to guarantee this” (EV 9). We must never lose our conviction that even the worst offenders are our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Certainly, one of the principle failures of the death penalty is that it denies the opportunity for repentance and conversion by definitively cutting short the efforts of

the Holy Spirit to transform the condemned person's soul in this life.

From a purely secular perspective, it is a fact that simply because states have always exercised the power to kill persons convicted of murder or treason, it does not follow that this power always has been exercised wisely or well. Given mankind's seemingly infinite capacity to err, we must admit that the death penalty poses significant problems. With scandalous frequency, people on death row have later been shown to be innocent of the crime for which they were convicted. As of 2012, 141 people incarcerated on death row in 26 states have been exonerated and freed when conclusive evidence of their innocence was later discovered. Even if the death penalty were always imposed without error, should we support its use? We teach that killing is wrong by responding with mercy and justice, not more killing. We do not support killing when society can be protected fully by life imprisonment without the possibility of parole.

As Catholics, we believe and put our hope in a merciful and loving God. We are conscious of our own brokenness and need for redemption. Our Lord calls us

to imitate Him more perfectly by witnessing to the inherent dignity of every human being, including those whose actions have been despicable. Our faith and hope is in the mercy of God who says to us, “Blessed are the merciful for they shall be shown Mercy (Mt 5:7) and “I desire mercy, not sacrifices”(Mt9:13).As Christians we are called to oppose the culture of death by witnessing to something greater and more perfect: a gospel of life, hope and mercy.

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