

REFLECTION ON THE DEATH PENALTY BY SISTER BRENDA WALSH, RACINE DOMINICAN

In recent times, the death penalty has been discussed as a political and a moral issue. We know from study after study that the death penalty does not deter crime. In fact, some studies show that States that do not support the death penalty fare better than those states that do. We also know that people of color and low-income people who are very poor are much more likely to end up on death row. We know too that in recent years, some innocent people have been wrongfully executed.

The death penalty is much more than a political issue. It is most of all a moral issue. As a people who support life, we know that life belongs only to God. We need to apply our life ethic to every phase of a person's life. We believe that all life is sacred, and we are not authorized to take the life of another, not even the life of a murderer. Does that mean we are soft on crime or have no sympathy or compassion for the victim's families? Absolutely not! We are called to minister to and pray for the families of both victim and offender. Often the strongest voice opposing the death penalty is coming from families of murder victims. Their motto is "Not in our Name." They want to know that people who favor the death penalty do not speak for them. They feel strongly that the cycle of violence will not be broken by state-sanctioned killings.

A few years ago, I heard one member of the group opposed to the death penalty, speak to an audience at Marquette University. His name is Bud Welch. His only daughter, Julie, graduated from Marquette. She was bright, successful and full of compassion for people's needs. She found a government job in the Federal building in Oklahoma city. She was about to announce her engagement to her friend, Eric. We all know the rest of the story. A bomb ripped the building apart and killed many of the workers in the building, including Julie.

Her father, Bud, said there were no words to describe his rage and hatred when the news of Julie's death came. He was always against the death penalty. Now his feelings denied that stance. He said: "I know I was temporarily insane." Then he recalled something Julie had said earlier when they heard on the radio about another execution in Texas. She said: "Dad, all they're doing is teaching hate to their children in Texas. It has no social redeeming value."

For eight months, Bud Welch struggled for peace and hope but couldn't find any. Deep down he knew he didn't want his daughter's killer put to death. So, he found a way to meet the father of Tim McVeigh, one of the perpetrators of the crime. He went to the home of Bill McVeigh in rural New York, just outside of Buffalo. They shared family stories and they got to know each other a bit on a Saturday morning. Bud Welch discovered that Mr. McVeigh was equally a victim of circumstances. Few people had sympathy for the family of the killer. Both families were suffering intensely from what happened in Oklahoma. Bud said to the family before he left. "We are all in this for the rest of our lives. I don't want' Tim killed. I will do everything in my power to prevent it." He and others have been speaking against the death penalty ever since.

In 1995, Pope John Paul II called on American Catholics to be committed to the defense of all human life, challenging his listeners to renew their efforts to end state sanctioned killings. He reminded people that violence only begets more violence.

Today, let us respond to God's call to be instruments of peace and healing. Let us pray for the victims of violence and their families. Let us pray also for all prisoners, especially those who are on death row. Let us work to root out the causes of violence that is so pervasive in our society. Let us also work to break the cycle of violence, including the death penalty, and work to create a community/society guided by the mercy and compassion of our God.

May God direct our feet on the path of peace.