VIOLENCE IN OUR SOCIETY: DEATH IS NOT THE ANSWER

A STATEMENT FROM THE BISHOPS OF LOUISIANA

Introduction

Our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, has made frequent references in the past year to the "culture of death." He has decried the way in which social and legal institutions have joined in legitimating the systematic slaying of innocent peoples in ethnic and racial conflicts, the destruction of human beings before they are born and the increasing phenomenon of medically assisted suicide and homicide.

This culture of death has spawned a frightening escalation of violence in our society. Some live in their homes and neighborhoods in constant dread of injury to their loved ones or themselves. Few go through life without witnessing or experiencing personally the impact of violent behavior, often rooted in addictions of one kind or another.

In this culture in which death is so prevalent and is often a deliberate choice in a desperate attempt to solve a human problem, it is easy to understand the anger, fear and frustration which lead some to promote the death penalty as the best way to counteract violence and get tough on crime.

However, we the Catholic Bishops of Louisiana, in agreement with the stated position of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, are compelled to raise a voice of reasoned dissent.[1] We are convinced that there is a more responsible way to address the growing incidence of murders and other acts of violence in our midst. We are aware that since 1722 when the first legal execution in Louisiana was recorded, there have been about 1,000 executions in our state. Twenty-one have taken place in the last ten years. Homicides have not decreased. We are convinced that violence begets violence; death begets death.

Catholic Moral Teaching

Our Catholic moral teaching has always recognized the responsibility of government to protect its citizens from persons who might be dangerous and harmful to others. This teaching has also allowed the death penalty for particularly heinous crimes when the criminal is a continued threat to others.

Our problem is this: capital punishment plunges us farther into the culture of death. We are convinced that we must choose consistently for life. This means foregoing a right to impose the death penalty in order to reverse the culture of violence and death. We favor a deliberate and courageous decision to break the cycle of violence. We must choose life.

We therefore oppose the death penalty in our present society because we believe in the sacredness and dignity of every human life, even the life of those among us who have committed terrible crimes. We want to restrict any and all ways in which our contemporary culture proposes death as the solution to a problem. We want to release energy and creativity in the pursuit of ways to reduce crime, protect the innocent, punish the criminal, work for the change in offenders, and yet consistently stand for the respect for life even of those who treat the lives of others with disdain.[2]

Concern for Victims and Their Families

We are keenly aware of the pain and suffering of the victims and those who have lost a loved one through the crime of murder and other crimes of violence. We also understand that innocent lives and personal property are increasingly threatened by community and domestic violence, drug related crimes, and terrorism. We need to deepen our commitment to persons who have suffered needless violence. They dare not be forgotten. It is our hope that within each church parish there will exist a ministry to those who have been victimized by violent crime.

"A Life for a Life"

Some persons who support the use of the death penalty claim to find the basis for that position in Sacred Scripture. An erroneous reading of lines from the Book of Exodus leads some people to believe that revenge, "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," was prescribed by God (Exodus 21:24). This exhortation, however, was not a call for revenge, but was actually an effort to control revenge. Israelite law and rabbinic tradition, as they evolved, placed many restrictions on the use of the death penalty. In the time of Jesus, the Jewish world rarely invoked the death penalty. The Old Testament, especially the Books of the Prophets, called the Israelite people to be merciful. Justice is properly understood when tempered with mercy.

Human Error

Awareness of our own human limitations and the limitations of institutions dedicated to law and order prevent us from knowing, with absolute certainty, who should live and who should die. We should dread being cast in the role of deciding who should be liable to the death penalty. Any human error in judgement pertaining to a death sentence is irreversible. The state always risks the possibility of making a fatal error of executing the wrong person.

Deterrence or Vengeance?

We are also concerned because we sense in our society a growing acceptance of revenge as a principal of justice. Deterrence, once an argument used to justify

the death penalty, is no longer widely advanced. Even law enforcement officials now readily admit that the death penalty does not deter violent crime. In the summer of 1987, for example, when the State of Louisiana executed eight people in 8½ weeks, the murder rate in New Orleans rose 16.3%. Furthermore, there is no evidence that the 36 states with the death penalty have a lower incidence of violent crime than the 14 states that do not.

We who claim to be followers of Jesus need to search out the roots and reasons for our current attitudes about punishment for offenders. We must ask ourselves whether or not the negative power of vengeance has found a home in our hearts. The very violence that frightens us so much has made us proponents of violence. If we have been shaped and formed by our fears and we expect serenity from the existence of the death penalty, we are sadly mistaken. The death penalty does not reduce crime. As a deterrent to crime, the death penalty is an abysmal failure.

Alternative to the Death Penalty

To speak out against the death penalty as punishment for terrible crimes is not intended to diminish in any way the gravity of the offenses. Terrible crimes must be met with effective and prompt punishment. We in the United States today have an alternative to the death penalty. It is long-term or life imprisonment without parole as punishment for first degree murder and certain other crimes for which the death penalty is currently imposed. This approach has been successfully incorporated in other western industrialized countries.

In 1979, our state adopted a statute requiring all persons convicted of first degree murder, if not executed, to serve a life sentence without benefit of parole. A life sentence is meant to be a real life sentence. While still allowing the possibility of a governor's pardon, such pardons have become extremely rare due to citizens' legitimate concerns about crime.

Conclusion

During World Youth Day, our Holy Father challenged the young people with these words: "Do not be ashamed of the Gospel. Be proud of the Gospel."

The Gospel kingdom of peace and justice will be built on a foundation of love that is capable of compassion and mercy. We must believe in the all-powerful redemptive love of God which can change hearts, convert people, and renew all things. We must be a people committed to hope for those who seem to be hopeless. We must be a people who see the value of a human life that others might think to be worthless. We must be a people who give praise to the God of all possibilities whose powerful Spirit of Love can renew the face of the earth.

[1] For further reference, see "U.S. Bishops' Statement on Capital Punishment" (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, November, 1980).

[2] "Preserving the common good of society requires rendering the aggressor unable to inflict harm. For this reason the traditional teaching of the Church has acknowledged as well founded the right and duty of legitimate public authority to punish malefactors by means of penalties commensurate with the gravity of the crime, not excluding, in cases of extreme gravity, the death penalty.

"If bloodless means are sufficient to defend human lives against an aggressor and to protect public order and the safety of persons, public authority should limit itself to such means, because they better correspond to the concrete conditions of the common good and are more in conformity to the dignity of the human person."

"Catechism of the Catholic Church," English translation for the United States of America (United States Catholic Conference, 1994), sections 2266 and 2267.

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