

Bishops' Campaign to End the Death Penalty

By Anne Y. Koester, Associate Director, Georgetown Center for Liturgy

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Teacher/Facilitator Preparation

In March of this year, the U.S. Bishops launched a new campaign to end the use of the death penalty. Perhaps it's more accurate to call it a "renewed" campaign, since the Bishops of the United States have been calling for an end to the death penalty for the past 25 years. The Bishops' campaign is an opportunity for justice educators to bring the issue of the death penalty and the Catholic Church's teaching on this issue to the attention of students/group members with whom we work. A brochure and other resources to help Catholics participate in the campaign can be found at:

<http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/national/deathpenalty>

Of note on this site is a brochure that speaks to the question "Why a Campaign Now?," provides facts about and Catholic teaching on the death penalty, gives information on what Catholics today are thinking about the issue, and suggests that people can do to participate in the campaign. The brochure notes that other resources are being developed by the bishops' conference to assist with facilitating conversation about this important social issue.

Also of interest is the editorial, "Innocence and the Death Penalty," in the February 7, 2005 issue of *America* magazine (<http://www.americamagazine.org/editorial.cfm?textID=3992&articletypeID=38&issueID=517>) The editorial cites a report by the Death Penalty Information Center (www.deathpenaltyinfo.org) that describes a shift in public perceptions of capital punishment, a shift marked by decreasing support for the death penalty.

Finally, you will see in my Reflection (below) that I refer to the story of Bud Welch, the father of a young woman who died in the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. More of Mr. Welch's story can be found at:

<http://www.journeyofhope.org/pages/people.htm>

With Students/Group Members

Tell the students/group members about the U.S. Bishops' Campaign to End the Use of Death Penalty, noting why the Bishops have launched the campaign, the facts cited in the campaign brochure, and Catholic teaching on the death penalty. What are the students or groups members' comments and questions in response to this information? (Small group discussion might be a good starting point with this question, since it is likely that everyone will want to express their opinions on this high profile social issue. Comments from the small group discussion can then be brought to the larger group.)

Read the reflection that follows and invite the students/group members to respond to the questions at the end of the reflection in a 2-part discussion. I suggest the focus of part 1 be on what the liturgy teaches us about forgiveness. Encourage the students/group members to identify the many ways in which Sunday liturgy expresses the importance of forgiveness. A possible follow-up question is to ask whether what they have learned on Sundays has helped them during a time when they needed to forgive or seek the forgiveness of another. Invite them to tell their stories of their experiences with forgiveness.

Part 2 of the discussion (perhaps on a different day to give the students/group members an opportunity to absorb more deeply the discussion about liturgy and forgiveness) can then focus on how what we learn about forgiveness on Sundays help us in our thinking about the death penalty, as well as how Bud Welch's story might influence our thinking.

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April 19, 2005 marked the 10th anniversary of the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. One hundred and sixty-eight women, men, and children died that day at the hands of a young man named Timothy McVeigh. The nation was stunned. Countless people were left to pick up the pieces of their lives after their loved ones died in a senseless act of hate and violence. The death penalty was imposed on McVeigh. He was executed six years later.

I was reminded of the anniversary of this terrible day when the story of Bud Welch, the father of a 23-year-old woman who died that day, was told on NBC's Weekend Today program. Mr. Welch's story is powerful – and very moving. It's a story of conversion and forgiveness. It's a story of a man who could in the midst of his own terrible grief see the grief of another. It's the story of someone who had the courage to speak publicly about his opposition to the death penalty.

Mr. Welch said in the news story that he changed his position on the death penalty. He went from initially supporting the death penalty for McVeigh to opposing it. His change of heart was due in part to looking into the eyes of Timothy McVeigh's father, Bill. What Bud Welch saw in Bill McVeigh's eyes was a deep pain, a deep pain not unlike what he knew after his daughter's death. It was this pain that the two of them held in common that moved Bud Welch to recognize that Bill McVeigh was also a grieving father and a victim of what happened that tragic day in Oklahoma City. Mr. Welch's ability to see in this new way led him to reach out to Bill McVeigh and to take a public stand in opposition to the death penalty in general and in particular, for Timothy McVeigh. Importantly, Mr. Welch also said that it was through forgiveness that his own woundedness as a grieving parent began to heal. Forgiveness is what gave him a sense of peace within in his own heart.

Forgiving someone who said or did something to hurt us, or asking someone to forgive us when we said or did something that was hurtful is an important part of living – and yet, we often find forgiving another and asking some-

one to forgive us so very difficult. Our egos might get in the way. Our pride holds us back. Our hurt feelings or anger towards another might overshadow the need to reconcile. Our insistence that the other be punished or suffer first might keep us from showing mercy. Whatever the reason, we are not always willing participants in the process of forgiveness.

Maybe the rehearsing we do every Sunday can help us. When we gather for Eucharist, we learn – and learn again – what it is like to be forgiven and what it means to forgive. We learn how to ask for forgiveness and how to forgive others.

Think about all that we learn about forgiveness on a given Sunday. For example, at the beginning of Mass, after the presider greets us, he invites us to recollect...to call to mind missed opportunities to live as God calls us to live...to recall any words or actions or inactions on our part that harmed our relationships. *Together* we acknowledge to God and to one another that we sometimes stumble on our journey of faith – we sin; we do or fail to do what will give us and others life. And how a humbling it is for me and for you to say “and to you my brothers and sisters, to pray for me to the Lord our God.” And how humbling and comforting it is to hear the presider say, “May Almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sin, and bring us to life everlasting.” Amen! *We are* forgiven. God's love is unconditional – it is given without ties, without boundaries, without limitations. Can people see this same forgiving love in us?

What else comes to mind? What else does the liturgy teach us about forgiveness? You might think about the scripture readings...the prayers...the songs we sing...we sign of peace...receiving communion...being dismissed to love and serve the Lord....

How might what we learn about forgiveness on Sundays help us in our thinking about the death penalty? How does Bud Welch's story help our thinking about the death penalty?