

It's not so rare

FOR VICTIMS' FAMILIES TO FORGIVE by Marianne Race, CSJ

You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But now I tell you: do not take revenge on someone who wrongs you. (Mt. 5:38)



The picture still haunts me. A fireman, dusty with debris, was holding the lifeless body of a beautiful child he'd carried out of the bombed Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, April 19, 1995. The pain and grief on his face mirrored mine, both of us compassionate strangers to this child's family.

Imagine the devastation of those who knew and loved this child. Such deep grief and loss numb the heart and soul. It is understandable that this senseless taking of innocent life could lead one to anger, outrage and the desire to retaliate in kind. One might even believe that killing the one who killed would bring relief from the pain of personal loss. Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation www.mvfr.org know differently. Murder victims' families have suffered tremendously; their wounds may never heal completely. The steps to healing include the compassionate hospitality of others, recognizing that we live in a violent society, and taking action to reduce the violence, not cause more of it.

Art by Joshua Rex. Based on the original Pulitzer Prize winning photo by Charles H. Porter IV.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says, "offer no resistance to injury, when a person strikes you on the right cheek, turn and offer the other." (Mt 5:39) I thought Jesus was telling us to be doormats, to let others walk on us. Then a simple example from my own childhood enlightened that passage for me. My brother and I were fighting over something, I know not what; it's what siblings do. Mom intervened. I said, "He started it." My brother had an equally accusatory response, of course. Mom said, "One started, one continued, both guilty." Retaliation continues a cycle of violence. Jesus challenges us to respond on a level higher than our opponent; rather than retaliation, do something unexpected, something that interrupts the cycle of violence.

The example of children fighting is a simple one. Is it possible to put this gospel teaching into practice when the stakes are so much higher? When a family member has been murdered, or there are hundreds or thousands of victims such as in the attack on the Murrah Federal Building or the World Trade Center? Bud Welch, whose daughter died in the Oklahoma bombing, speaks today against the use of capital punishment. He says, "The death penalty is about revenge and hate, and revenge and hate is why my daughter and those 167 other people are dead today." None of us wants to be defined as being about revenge and hate. And so, the Congregation of St. Joseph has chosen to stand with murder victims' families and the perpetrators of these crimes, those on death row.

There are many practical reasons to eliminate capital punishment. It is not necessary to kill a person in order to protect society from him or her; we have a secure prison system. Capital punishment has a negative effect on society, perpetuating a culture of violence. It is expensive, possibly twice as expensive as a sentence of life without parole, though arguments differ on this point. However, the majority of people on death row are poor. That means the state pays for both defense and prosecution, sometimes for decades. Our justice system is flawed; given the number of people who have been exonerated from death row, there is the definite possibility that innocent people have been executed.

In her recent book, *Quest for the Living God*, Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ, speaks eloquently about the dignity of all life. "God lives as the mystery of love. Human beings

are created in the image of this God. Therefore, a life of integrity is impossible unless we also enter into the dynamic of love and communion with others." It is this dynamic of love and communion with others that calls us to stand with people who are poor or marginalized, victims and yes, criminals. We know from Scripture and Church teaching that we are made in the image of God. This source of our being gives each of us a profound dignity of life. We find it easier to recognize this dignity of life in others when considering children, especially the unborn, those born into poverty or abused, or those trafficked into some kind of slavery. Children are innocent; they have not chosen this terrible path. It takes a deeper faith to see the image of God in those who have done great harm to others.

Our Church leaders stand with these offenders. Cardinal Joseph Bernardin articulated a consistent ethic of life, which included opposition to both abortion and the death penalty, in 1985. Ten years later, in his encyclical *The Gospel of Life*, Pope John Paul II taught that opposing capital punishment should be part of a pro-life witness for a culture of life that promotes human dignity and solidarity. The National Conference of Catholic Bishops as well as individual bishops across the country have repeated the teaching. Pope John Paul II, during a visit to the United States in 1999, said, "The dignity of human life must never be taken away even in the case of someone who has done great evil. Modern society has the means of protecting itself, without definitively denying criminals the chance to reform."

In 2005 the U.S. Council of Catholic Bishops issued a statement calling for an end to the use of the death penalty. ("A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death," available at www.usccb.org/deathpenalty). After the execution of Saddam Hussein, Pope Benedict XVI issued this statement through the Vatican's top justice prelate, Cardinal Martino: "Killing the guilty one is not the way to rebuild justice and reconcile society. On the contrary, there is the risk that the spirit of revenge is fueled and that the seeds of new violence are sown."

There can be no mistaking the Church's clear stand on this issue.

In addition to these practical and faith reasons to stand with our brothers and sisters on death row, the timing of our support is critical. There are many pressing



Pennsylvania Amish mourn the loss of five of their children ages 6–13 who were killed in their schoolhouse on October 2, 2006 by a gunman. On the very day of the shooting, a grandfather of one of the murdered Amish girls was heard warning some young relatives not to hate the killer, saying, “We must not think evil of this man.” Another Amish father noted, “He had a mother and a wife and a soul and now he’s standing before a just God.”

issues that demand our attention and action. Some would say it is immigration reform, others the rescue of our dying planet, violence, poverty, racism, drug abuse, the use and abuse of water resources or the single life issue, abortion. How we would love to make progress in solving any one of these problems. So why is it important to consider standing with the criminal at this time? Consider this, states with the most Catholics have the fewest executions; the states with the fewest Catholics have the most executions. (Dale Recinella, *America*, April, 2008) We, as a Catholic community, can make a difference in moving our state legislatures toward eliminating the death penalty in our country. New Jersey and New Mexico are the most recent states to do so. Colorado came within one vote. Connecticut’s close decision to eliminate the death penalty was recently vetoed by Governor Jodie

Rell. When New Jersey ended use of capital punishment Celeste Fitzgerald, Director of New Jerseyans for Alternatives to the Death Penalty, stated, “All, from the Bishops to clergy to religious communities to Catholic Charities to the Knights of Columbus — played a critical role in ending the death penalty in New Jersey.”

The Congregation of St. Joseph is working for systemic change toward a complete moratorium on the death penalty and prison reform. We will continue to offer support to the families of murder victims, as well as to prisoners on Death Row. We hope our doing so will raise awareness among others in the Catholic community and beyond. In addition, we hope others will take advantage of opportunities to become more educated about both Catholic teaching on the death penalty and the situation of

our justice system. See www.catholicsmobilizing.com for excellent materials and www.deathpenaltyinfo.org for up-to-date information. Visit the site Murder Victims Families for Human Rights (www.willsworld.com/mvfhr) to see how victims of serious crime have responded to their personal tragedies.

Most importantly, reflect on your own position. For most of us, this issue is not front and center. Prisoners are out of sight and consequently, out of mind. Yet, what a marvelous victory it would be if our living faith, our dynamic of love and communion with others brought about an end to state killing in our name.

“I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live.” (Deut 30:19) ●