

Faith Formation Conference provides 'Catholic Perspective on the Death Penalty'

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“Catholic Perspective on the Death Penalty” was a workshop presented at the 2009 Faith Formation Conference, facilitated by Terry McCaffrey, member and current president of California People of Faith Working Against the Death Penalty (CPF).

He is also liaison to the Diocese of San Jose on the topic and has headed a campaign for a moratorium on the death penalty which was approved by the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors. He produced the video “Interview with an Executioner.” He is a member of the Thomas Merton Community, part of St. Thomas Aquinas Parish in Palo Alto.

Also presenting at the workshop were Father Michael Carson, pastor of Queen of Apostles Parish, San Jose, and Vicki Schieber, activist against the death penalty.

Father Carson, who has a background in prison ministry, spoke on the Church’s position on the death penalty as well as Restorative Justice. He explained that opposition to the death penalty has long been a part of Catholic social teaching and that the Church is also concerned for victim’s families because too often they are ignored in discussions about the death penalty.

Father Carson said the Church seeks to help victims and their families heal from their tragic losses and that is where Restorative Justice is applied. Punishment and retribution give way to rehabilitation and redemption, he explained. (See story on Restorative Justice, Nov. 17, 2009 edition of The Valley Catholic.)

The Catholic Mobilizing Network to End the Use of the Death Penalty provides background and materials for use by parishioners; visit <http://www.catholicsmobilizing.org> or Equal Justice USA at <http://www.ejusa.org>

Materials note practical arguments against the death penalty:

- High risk of executing innocent people.
- The death penalty is much more expensive than life in prison without parole; the appeals process is lengthy.
- Not an effective deterrent.
- People sentenced to death are generally poor.

- A death sentence is disproportionately given to those who are convicted of crimes committed against a white victim.
- It is bad for murder victims' families, consigning them to years of uncertainty, endless appeals and perhaps unwanted media attention.

Church teaching against the death penalty has been consistent for 35 years since the U.S. Bishops called for an end to it, Father Carson said. In 2005 the USCCB launched the Catholic Campaign to End the Use of the Death Penalty noting, "We cannot teach respect for life by taking life."

In November 2000, the USCCB issued a statement, "Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice," in which they said, "It is time for a new national dialogue on crime and corrections, justice and mercy, responsibility and treatment.

"How can we restore respect for law and life...protect and rebuild communities...confront crime without vengeance, and defend life without taking life? "The dignity of the human person applies to both victim and offender.

As bishops, we believe that the current trend of more prisons and more executions, with too little education and drug treatment, does not truly reflect Christian values and will not really leave our communities safer," the bishops said.

McCaffrey talked about why people end up on death row and that a disproportionate number of poor people and ethnic minorities are sentenced to death.

- Over 90 percent of people on death row were too poor to afford their own attorney.
- Geography plays a role in who lives and dies. Similar murders might get a death sentence in one county but not in one nearby.
- Over 80 percent of those executed in the U.S. were convicted of killing a white person, even though African Americans are victims in at least half of all homicides (according to Death Row USA, NAACP, Legal Defense Fund).
- African Americans constitute almost 13 percent of the U.S. population but represent 42 percent of death row inmates.

As part of their 2000 statement, the U.S. Bishops noted that prison inmates have a high rate of substance abuse, illiteracy and mental illness. The number of women being incarcerated has increased 600 percent since 1980 largely as the result of tougher drug laws.

McCaffrey explained that CPF provides information debunking myths about the death penalty. The 15 states, for example, that have abolished it consistently record the lowest murder rates. Texas, which executes more prisoners than any other state, also has one of the nation's highest murder rates.

In addition, McCaffery said, the extensive financial and staff resources used to pursue an execution could be better used to aid murder victims' survivors via grief counseling and other assistance.

Since 1973, some 130 prisoners have been released from death row due to wrongful conviction. "Human beings are fallible and mistakes will never be entirely eliminated," McCaffrey said. "There are many social and moral pitfalls inherent in the death penalty."

Vicki Schieber is a survivor of a murder victim. Her daughter, Shannon, was raped and murdered on May 7, 1998 while finishing her first year of graduate school on a full scholarship at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania.

The killer was not arrested until 2002 and is serving several life sentences without parole in Colorado and Pennsylvania, not only for Shannon's rape and murder, but for 13 other sexual assaults as well.

Vicki and her husband, Sylvester, both Maryland residents, testified in support of a Maryland bill that would extend that state's moratorium on executions and create a commission to study the way the death penalty is imposed. She also testified in Pennsylvania for the abolition of the death penalty. She has taught many high school classes on abolition and has published op-ed pieces in newspapers.

In her presentation at the workshop, Schieber stressed that she was vocal in her opposition to the death penalty long before Shannon's murderer was apprehended.

The Schiebers fought the district attorney and prosecutors to keep the death penalty from being applied to their daughter's killer. "The death penalty is against our religion, a belief system in which life is held to be sacred," Vicki said. "We know that there are many inequities in how the states apply it.

"I believe we must focus on abolition in the context of its being a human rights issue and work hard to bring the world community of murder victims together to oppose the death penalty in the U.S.

"I have traveled in many parts of the world," she said, "and citizens in other countries are appalled at the inequitable application of this sentence in our homeland."

Schieber has spent her career in a variety of financial marketing and management roles, and has long been active in leadership positions in non-profits dedicated to literacy and programs for elderly, disabled and low-income residents of Washington, DC.

She is the recipient of the Fannie Mae Foundation Good Neighbor Award, the Courage in Community Award of the McAuley Institute Board of Trustees, and the Exceptional Community Spirit Award from Rebuilding Together of Washington, DC.

http://www.valleycatholiconline.com/print_story.php?newsid=1011