

WHAT WOULD YOU DO...?

How would you feel if your child were murdered? What would you want to do to the killer, if you had your chance? What would you do, if you indeed were given that chance? And how would you feel if, later, it were determined that the person presented to you as the killer were in fact innocent?

This is only one scenario (all too possible, unfortunately) which on a practical basis argues against the inflicting of the death penalty in our country. There are other practical reasons, as well. How many of us know that most of the rest of what is commonly referred to as 'the civilized world' cannot understand what to them is seen as our national blood-lust? How many of us know that by supporting the death penalty we are, on that issue, aligned with such nations as North Korea, Iran and Iraq (the 'axis of evil,' as they were called by President Bush), as well as nations like Saudi Arabia? Is this the company we want to keep?

On a practical/moral basis, the fact is that such retributive punishment never brings the peace and closure that families of victims so desire and deserve. That kind of closure is the result of the peace that only Jesus can give, not the world (Jn. 14:27). It comes from the healing that is possible only in the context of forgiveness, of letting go. Until we can do this, the evil-doer still controls us...

The revised *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (#2267) makes it clear that, even presuming we can fully determine the guilty party and his responsibility (a dubious assumption), capital punishment can be justified only if it is the only possible way of offering continued protection to human life. But, the *Catechism* continues, in our times this is 'very rare, if not practically non-existent.' We can protect society and punish the criminal without resorting to descending to his level by killing. We can, simultaneously, offer him the context for repentance and spiritual growth. And we can therefore live the Gospel message of love, even of enemies.

When a madman wreaked havoc and death in a small Amish community some years ago, it was reported with amazement that that community could embrace the family of the killer with love and mercy. Yet this is what Jesus tells us we should do, as His disciples. If we are in fact a Christian nation, why should this seem extraordinary?

In spite of the personal opinions of a former Alabama Attorney General and a currently sitting US Supreme Court justice (both of whom are Catholics), mistakes are made in capital cases, and the Catholic Church stands in solidarity against capital punishment. Does this challenge you? That's OK—a Gospel that does not challenge isn't much of a 'gospel,' after all, is it? What you need to do is not to dismiss this challenge out of hand. Accept the challenge and pray to see how it can make you grow in Christ. Then respond as the Holy Spirit leads you. And during this prayerful process, continue asking yourself, "What would you do...?"