

Death penalty diminishes our society

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By the time you read this, a firing squad will very likely have fired the shots to kill Ronnie Lee Gardner in the name of the State of Utah. Mr. Gardner was given the death penalty for killing attorney Michael Burdell on April 2, 1985, a terrible tragedy that compounded his 1984 killing of Melvyn John Otterstrom during a robbery. On Friday, June 18, Mr. Gardner's appeals will no doubt have run out and he will have been executed. But while states have the right and the responsibility for protecting their residents, for Utah to take a life in our name diminishes all of us, because our society can clearly fulfill those obligations without resorting to the death penalty. From a purely economic viewpoint, it's less expensive to incarcerate a murderer for life than to execute him. To those who would say that the cost is due to all the appeals, I would respond, "If you're going to take a life you want to add to the appeals, not subtract from them, due to the gravity of the death penalty. And even then, despite all the technology, appeals and care taken, the state runs the risk of taking an innocent life, as has been shown by those on death row who have been exonerated."

Since 1973, there have been 139 exonerations of death row inmates in the United States. As Christians, the thought of an innocent man being put to death in our name should be particularly abhorrent since Our Lord Himself was an innocent man condemned to die by execution. But all of this misses the point: the state should not be involved in executing prisoners in the first place since this violates the sanctity of human life and assumes prerogatives that belong only to God. The Catechism of the Catholic Church is quite clear on this point (paragraphs 2267 and 2306). Once you take a life, you can't give it back * only God can give life!

At the same time, I am very strongly in sympathy with the families of Mr. Gardner's victims. While I was in California I associated closely with groups that advocated for justice for families of murder victims. I saw firsthand the terrible tragedy and the ongoing mourning that takes place from such a violent act as murder. But as strongly as I feel for these people, I believe that the best way to support them is to give witness to the preciousness and the sanctity of life. God loves everybody, and that love admits to no exceptions. Our Catholic faith teaches us that life is a precious gift from God that must be respected and protected. We condemn and are abhorred by the acts of certain individuals, but we are called always to love and to forgive them as persons. We as Christians ask the state to not put a period where God has put a comma, but rather to allow the perpetrator time to repent and seek God's forgiveness as well as the forgiveness of the victims' families. It's through forgiveness that we find true healing. The concept that the death penalty brings closure is a myth, in my view. We are never going to find true closure in this life but we'll approach it most nearly through forgiveness. Until I have forgiven those who have offended me, the pain will weigh me down and be a heavy burden on my soul. Our Lord himself gave us the supreme example when he forgave his executioners while being crucified.

The morality of the death penalty also comes into question when one examines how unevenly it is applied. A disproportionate number of people on death row are poor or persons of color. Also, while 35 states in the U.S. have the death penalty, 15 do not. In addition, 65 percent of executions are conducted by only five states.

As a deterrent, the death penalty also fails. It is my impression that most people murder someone else in one of three circumstances: in a fit of passion, while they are under the influence of alcohol or drugs, or when they plan the act of murder so well that they think they won't get caught. In any of these three cases they're not considering that they may incur the death penalty for their actions. Indeed, not only does the death penalty fail to deter capital crimes, it seems to me that it perpetuates an atmosphere of violence and death. As Jesus warns us, "Those who live by the sword die by the sword." That sword cuts both ways! Witness those countries that don't have the death penalty and their lower incidence of crime than countries that do have it.

In their 1999 publication, "A Good Friday Appeal to End the Death Penalty," the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops states that "We cannot overcome crime by simply executing criminals, nor can we restore the lives of the innocent by ending the lives of those convicted of their murders. The death penalty offers the tragic illusion that we can defend life by taking life." All of us mourn the loss of innocent victims caught in the crosshairs of murder. But for the reasons stated above, I pray that our society can move beyond a system of justice that violates the long standing religious beliefs of many people, runs the risk of executing innocent persons, fails to deter and is applied unevenly. We are all brothers and sisters of each other with God as our Father, in Christ and through the Holy Spirit. I believe that the poet John Donne was correct when, in his famous poem, "For Whom the Bell Tolls," he shared the insight that each person's death diminishes all of us precisely because we are all one in God and in our shared humanity. If Ronnie Lee Gardner's execution goes forward on Friday, June 18, we will not have to "send for whom the bell tolls." We will already know, and we and our society will be diminished once again.