

QUOTES from HELEN PREJEAN, CSJ on the DEATH PENALTY

Many from a talk given at Mount Saint Joseph Convent on 4/25/95

“I was one of the people who resisted social justice. It was very confusing to me. I was in spiritual work and just didn’t see the connection between the gospel and social justice. This was partly because I didn’t know poor people personally. I knew where the projects were but never went there. Then I got involved with poor people and that journey led me to death row. That’s how God has worked with me.”

“Without encountering poor people, we can’t be transformed. Once you get involved with the poor, controversy follows you like a hungry dog.”

“We heard Maria Augusta Neal and it was then that the axis of my spiritual life changed. I can remember the line she spoke: ‘Integral to Jesus’ preaching to the poor was that they would be poor no longer.’ To follow Jesus meant that I had to be involved with the poor and with social justice.”

“There is no such thing as being politically neutral. If you are not working to change what is wrong, then you are upholding the status quo.”

“The grace I got from Patrick Sonnier was the way he died. He told me ‘I never knew love in my life until I met you. I had to come to prison to find love.’ I couldn’t bear the thought that he would die without looking at a loving face. I told him to look at me and I will be the face of Christ for you.”

“None of us is beyond redemption. Everyone is more than the worst thing we’ve done in our lives. Execution shows that the state is killing a different person than the one who entered death row. It shows we don’t believe in transformation.”

“Jesus, our brother, ... suffered execution at the hands of the state, but [he] did not let hatred overcome [him].”

“The movement to abolish the death penalty needs the religious community because the heart of religion is about compassion, human rights, and the inherent dignity of the human person made in the image of God.”

“... What makes the death penalty possible ... disconnection. ... The truth is that we all live in our different terrariums, and we don’t cross over, and we don’t see, and we don’t know, and we get our information about each other from the evening news.”

“... You can’t take the torture out of the death penalty. ... Conscious human beings condemned to death anticipate death ... and die a thousand times before they die.”

“... Torture, as Amnesty International defines it, is an extreme or physical assault on someone who has been rendered defenseless.”

“Abolition of the death penalty would cause barely a ripple in the criminal justice system, but it would send a shock wave through (institutions of) government, because then politicians would have to address the causes of crime.”



A REFLECTION

Death Row is filled with lonely, isolated, broken persons.

Tom, a beautiful, graceful young man with whom I spent a lot of time with before and during his Row experience, told me once: "The journey inward gives meaning to my existence here. The constant awareness that one day I may go to the 'chair' becomes less tortuous as I reflect on the present miseries".

I remember our first visit at Huntingdon SCI in western Pennsylvania. He was brought into a small bullet proof booth, with thick paned glass that separated us and with both feet and hands shackled, accompanied by a most unhappy looking guard. Tom asked that I place my hand on the pane where he had placed his. He wept, saying, "This is the closest warm touch from another human being,". His demeanor so desolate; his faith, his utter dependency on the One who only satisfies the human heart, he said, "continues to strengthen me for the next leg of the journey."

I know the violence that people commit that puts them here...yet, the broken Christ always is before me when I think of those precious moments.

-- Virginia Jenkins, SSJ
Founder of Hannah House



"We see from where we stand." (Haitian Proverb)

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

Restorative Justice is based on unconditional love for the victim and for the offender. It recognizes that crime is a violation of people and relationships, that violations create obligations, and that the central obligation is to make things right again. Contrary to our present punitive, retributive system that determines blame and administers pain (often incarceration), Restorative Justice focuses on healing; with the help of a highly trained facilitator, the victim and offender determine their needs; and what can be done to meet those needs, what can be done for healing. Then with the support of the facilitator, the victim, offender, and perhaps others are involved together in a search for solutions to repair and reconcile. Three models are Victim-Offender Reconciliation, Conferencing (both victim and offender have a support person(s)) and the Circle Process (includes victim, offender, and concerned others)

This can also be applied to our personal lives. Sometimes we feel like the victim, other times we are the offender. With the help of a trained facilitator when needed, the victim, offender, and perhaps others need to rationally discuss what happened; the offender needs to take responsibility for what he/she did, and together the victim, offender, and perhaps others search for a solution that will lead to healing and reconciliation.

When I live and encourage others to live Restorative Justice and when I urge them to advocate for Restorative Justice in place of our current "justice" system, I believe that I am more truly SSJ with our mission of unity; with all of our community I am companioning Jesus in the ministry of healing and reconciliation.

-- Dolores Chepiga, SSJ
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