

Commentary to the 7th Sunday of Ordinary Time (A)

The Law of Talons vs the Law of Love, Capital Punishment and the Catholic



I want to begin this morning with a phrase from the famous English writer G.K. Chesterton. Chesterton was at the height of his literary career about ninety years ago. He took a serious look at his relationship with God and asked to be received into the Roman Catholic Church. Perhaps you might remember from your school days that Chesterton loved to coin phrases that at first glance were humorous, but on further thought were really quite deep. One of my favorites is: The problem with Christianity is not that it has been tried and found wanting but that it has not been tried.

Perhaps the most difficult of all of Christ's commands are those which are expounded in today's gospel, from the Sermon on the Mount. "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also;" and "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you".

All of us, beginning with myself, are inclined to think that Jesus doesn't really mean us when we have been assaulted, or when someone humiliates us or mocks us, or when someone pushes our buttons in such a way that we are thrown into emotional turmoil. With the continual exploitation of our emotions by the media, the non stop presentation of the terrors of life in the news, we are tempted to think that certainly when the Lord says "Forgive them" or "Love them" he cannot be referring to the terrible people of the world who commit heinous crimes. Furthermore, with the amount of violence we are exposed to on TV and in the movies, we are inclined to feel a great gratification when the evil suffer

injury. "What goes around comes around" we are very satisfied in saying. Of course, we are not so excited by the true meaning of this statement: Those who do evil should suffer evil. There is something within us that believes that real justice is in the law of talons: an eye for an eye. In reality, we would rather live in an Old Testament world, a world without Christ, than live in a world where we are expected to sacrifice our desire for vengeance to the Lord's command to love our enemies. Christianity has not been tried and found wanting. It has been tried and found difficult.

Perhaps it is for these reasons, perhaps it is for other reasons, that many Catholics have quite a bit of difficulty with the Church's position opposing capital punishment. The popes have spoken out numerous times against capital punishment. The Bishops of the United States voiced their opposition to Capital punishment as a unified body over thirty years ago. It would be helpful for us to recall this statement and the justifications for their arguments. Back in November of 1980 the Bishops noted that Catholic teaching historically has accepted the principle that the state has the right to take the life of a person guilty of an extremely serious crime and that the state has the right to protect itself and its citizens from grave harm. However, they wrote, in the contemporary American society, the legitimate purposes of punishment no longer justifies the imposition of the death penalty. The legitimate purposes of punishment are deterrence, reform and retribution. The death penalty was reinstated in 1967. The soaring number of murders in our country since then shows that the death penalty does not work as a deterrent. The criminal who is put to death, obviously, cannot reform even if this reform were to be limited to whatever contributions that criminal could make from a prison cell. Finally, retribution refers to the repayment of stolen property. No amount of retribution can replace the life of the victim.

It is right here that today's gospel hits home. People tend to confuse retribution with vengeance. Most people, Catholic and non Catholic, support the death penalty not to protect society, but to inflict vengeance upon the criminal. Time and again we hear the arguments: this person has caused so much pain to the victim and to his or her families that he does not deserve to live. Or "I know my slain son or daughter will rest easier once the criminal is killed." Or, "As long as the criminal is alive, I will never feel that this matter is put to rest."

In this highly charged emotional atmosphere, we have to stand strongly behind the principle that all life is sacred, even that of a terrible criminal. The Church cannot at one moment mount a mammoth campaign to respect life in the fight against abortion and at the same time ignore the fact that here in the twenty-first century we are still eliminating life in the name of justice. One of the great gifts of Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, the saintly departed Archbishop of Chicago, is the doctrine of the seamless garment. Basically, this doctrine states that we have to be consistent and support all human life. There is no seam in the garment, no line where the justification for eliminating human life changes.

I know that there are some who read this who are thinking that I am taking a liberal position regarding

capital punishment. No, I am taking the position of the Catholic Church. The Church does not choose liberal or conservative positions. The Church proclaims the truth and liberals or conservatives decide if this fits into their own agendas.

Perhaps the most difficult words we pray today and every day are those words found in the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." That archaic word, trespass, means to cross the line. When we say the Our Father we are saying that we will forgive those who cross the line of common decency so that we also might be forgiven for any ways that we have crossed the line. If we refuse to forgive, if we demand the law of talons, an eye for an eye, if we desire vengeance more than Christ's presence, then we are refusing to accept Jesus Christ himself.

Christianity is continually reforming itself. Christian society must continually scrutinize its actions to see if it is living up to the standards set by the Lord. Consider slavery. It took almost nineteen hundred years for Christians to recognize that slavery was incompatible with Christianity. It will take many more years for Christians to eliminate the various ways the law of talons has been embedded into our culture. But the standard is there. The standard for what is Christian and what is not Christian is the Law of the New Kingdom, the Sermon on the Mount, the Word of God.

G. K. Chesterton certainly had it right: The problem with Christianity is not that it has been tried and found wanting but that it has not been tried. Christ never said that following Him would be easy. Nor did he say that His followers would ever enjoy the majority position. Jesus just said that He would be with us always.

That is worth every sacrifice, even the sacrifice of our deepest, darkest desires.

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