

A Passage Away From Violence

MAY, 2001: It was only a few weeks ago, gathered at the Easter Vigil around the baptismal water and the new fire, that we entered into a truly revolutionary deed.

Drawing near to a place newly glowing with a fragile light, we enacted our passage out of slavery and violence. In those moments, all the threads of our lives, all the hopes and anguish of our world, were drawn into the great story of Jesus' resurrection -- God's faithfulness outpoured in the never-ending giving of life.

That night, around the fire and water; we spoke our promise to make the great story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection our home, and to bring the gift of resurrection to every place of death.

We were called to practice a spirituality of life -- and that night, as a community, we said **Yes**.

To theologian Monika Hellwig, becoming a community of creative non-violence is one of the most eloquent testimonies to the power of the resurrection in our world. [1](#)

Yet, how distant that Easter gathering seems now. A dark pall has hung over our country during the weeks since then, as the media draw our attention to the scheduled execution of Timothy McVeigh, the first federal execution in forty years.

The horror of the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City has affected the soul of the nation in a profound way. That one senseless act of violence took the lives of 168 men, women, and children, and has sent shards of disaster into the lives of countless others.

In the face of something so incomprehensible, we are desperate for an answer to the haunting question, "Why?"

How we respond to the violence of the Oklahoma City bombing will also affect the soul of the nation. Desperate for an answer, the death penalty has become the official response.

However, the testimony of a man whose life has been permanently altered by the tragedy can point us to another way.

These are the words of Bud Welch, who lost his 23-year old daughter, Julie Marie, in the Oklahoma City bombing:

When my daughter Julie was killed, I joined a 'club' that I wish had no members. The price of admission is too high. I know the pain of losing a loved one because of

a senseless act of violence[...] The execution of Timothy McVeigh will not bring back Julie or her colleagues, nor will it end the grieving for any one of the victims of the Oklahoma City bombing. **Revenge and hate are the reasons 168 people died that day in 1995.** I oppose the death penalty absolutely, in all cases, because in all cases it is an act of revenge[...] We should ask ourselves: How much killing and how much revenge are we prepared to live through? ²

Revenge and counter-violence will never end violence; they can only send the roots of violence deeper, in a more insidious and corrosive way. Over 700 persons have already been executed in the United States since the 1976 reinstatement of the death penalty. Hundreds more await execution.

The death penalty, as an act of revenge, has not, and cannot, end the violence that destroys people's lives and futures. The imposition of the death penalty has only one effect: to make us into the very thing we hate.

Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical letter, *The Gospel of Life*, has written about this immense challenge to our life in society:

The eclipse of the sense of God and humanity is at the heart of the individual conscience, but it is also a question of the 'moral conscience' of society. It, too, is responsible, because it tolerates or fosters the 'culture of death,' creating and consolidating actual 'structures of sin.' Good and evil are confused, precisely in relation to the fundamental right to life. [Today] there is evidence of a growing opposition to the death penalty. Modern society has the means of effectively suppressing crime by rendering criminals harmless without definitively denying them the chance to reform. ³

We must say **No!** to this socially approved murder by execution, as to every other form of violence.

Only a refusal to continue the cycle of revenge has the possibility of offering human beings -- especially those who suffer -- a different future, by transforming our culture from its roots.

We come full circle, back to the fire and water of Easter night, when we were drawn into the great story of Jesus' resurrection. For the stories of the Resurrection in the Gospels are stories of transformation -- the transformation of persons and communities -- through the often-hidden workings of God's life-giving grace.

They are stories of a healing so profound that we are given a mission to become life-givers ourselves. Finding our true home in the great story of Jesus' death and resurrection, we can dare to live a new response to the violence of our world.

We must say **No!** to the death penalty, in all cases, and thereby each say our **Yes!** to God's work of resurrection.

SOME RESOURCES FOR REFLECTION AND PRAYER

Antoinette Bosco, *Choosing Mercy: The Mother of Murder Victims Pleads to End the Death Penalty*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001.

Mark Lewis Taylor, *The Executed God: The Way of the Cross in Lockdown America*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001.

Johann Christoph Arnold, *Why Forgive?* Farmington, PA: Plough Publishing House, 2000.

Robert Schreiter; C.P.P.S., *The Ministry of Reconciliation: Spirituality and Strategies*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998.

1. Monika Hellwig, *Jesus, the Compassion of God* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1983) 104-105.
2. Bud Welch, Message to Activists and the Media, 12 March 2001.
3. John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life*, 24, 27.

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