

Homily

ALUMNI DAYS 2019

October 17, 2019

A week ago I attended the 10th Anniversary celebration of the Catholic Mobilizing Network at the Apostolic Nunciature in Washington. Chair of our Peace and Justice Committee, seminarian Kyle Gorenski attended with me. CMN was created ten years ago in response to the Church's teaching on capital punishment and promotes the concept of restorative justice. Their Dignity and Life Award was given to Bishop Joseph A. Fiorenza, Founders Award to Karen Clifton, and Lifetime Achievement Award to Sr. Helen Prejean, CSJ, the "Rage'n Cajun" made famous, of course, by the book and then movie "Dead Men Walking".

Opposition to the death penalty is a tough sell. It's easier to mete out punishment than to forgive, try to reconcile and rehabilitate. Those committed to abolition are passionate about it; but so are those who favor the death penalty. It's easy to be passionate about taking life when you become aware of the heinous manner in which some people take the lives of others. Often the family members of victims, secondary victims, are the most passionate of all. It's a debate filled with passion, even hysteria

Sr. Helen didn't begin her journey dedicated to abolishing the death penalty. Rather, she was assigned simply to accompany a man on his path to death at the hands of the state for an atrocious crime he had committed. Her main purpose was to help him face up to what he had done, to let go of all the rationalizations and compartmentalization, to acknowledge the fact that he had brutally and unjustly taken the life of another human being before his own life came to an end so that he could face Almighty God and give an honest account of his life and the harm he

had done, hopefully to encounter God's mercy. Her mission was a mission of peace: to try to help the man come to find peace within himself and in the sight of God. She eventually learned that her mission was to attempt to bring peace to the community at large, so society as well. It was only through accompanying this man on that lonely road to death that Sr. Helen became a fierce opponent of the death penalty, for she came to see that whatever peace those who are put to death for their crimes are able to find, there can never be true peace for those they have harmed by taking the life of a loved one or for society as a whole as long as we kill people in the name of justice. We don't have to, as the last three Popes have pointed out; there are other ways; ways that do not create and reinforce hopelessness.

That's what's at the heart of the matter, especially for Pope Francis: hope versus hopelessness. For that reason he came out recently not just against the death penalty, but also against life incarceration without the possibility of parole. For without the possibility of repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation and rehabilitation, all that's left is hopelessness. Those who are put to death by the state may come to hope in God, and many do. But for society, these measures are signs of society's hopelessness. And hopelessness, as we know, is a sin against the Holy Spirit.

Law knows only condemnation and punishment; it exists for that purpose. "Woe to you, scholars of the law!" You have taken away the key of knowledge. You yourselves have not entered, and you stop those trying to enter. You extinguish hope in the consequences you mete out.

Faith leads to hope; to forgiveness; to reconciliation and rehabilitation. With the Lord not condemnation and punishment, but kindness and mercy: With the Lord there is mercy, and fullness of redemption.

If, as a community of faith we dispense with kindness and mercy, if we give up on forgiveness, then surely we will have become the most hopeless people of all,

because central to the mystery of our faith, what it is all about is kindness and mercy; forgiveness and reconciliation, which bring hope. Forgiveness and attempts at reconciliation and rehabilitation even of those who have committed the most heinous acts. If we give up on forgiveness and reconciliation, as the Church of Jesus Christ we will have lost everything, we will have given up on all that really counts.

I'm not suggesting that it's easy. We do need well-ordered communities. We really do have to protect the innocent and the vulnerable. We can't take unreasonable chances with those who have given reason to believe that they have harmed or might harm others, but we have to believe in the possibility of redemption, reconciliation and rehabilitation, don't we? Or have we really become that hopeless? Have we given up on God's grace? Are we risking sin against the Holy Spirit? I'm not suggesting foolishness, or taking chances with other peoples' well-being. It's not easy. It's not always easy to have faith, to believe in God's mercy, to believe in rehabilitation, reconciliation and rehabilitation. It's not easy to know what to do or how to do it. But is it ever easy when we really choose to take up whatever cross is involved and follow after Him? We do have to be prudent; but don't we also have to strive to be faithful? We are called upon *not* to dispense *with* forgiveness, but to dispense mercy and forgiveness?

When I think about these things, when I attend events like that sponsored by the Catholic Mobilizing network; when I reflect on what Pope Francis has said about the death penalty and life without parole, it takes me back to something said by my canon law professor many years ago. The Code of Canon Law does not have a death penalty, but it does have things akin to life without parole. "No one believes these canons will ever be used," my canon law professor said; "it's been a long, long time since the Church has even considered using them. Canonists have a hard time imagining they will ever be used again. But if they are revived, these canons

are like the capital punishment of canon law; like a life sentence without the possibility of parole.” He was talking about the canons on the permanent suspension of clerics and dismissal from the clerical state.

Is there some way we can get people to face the consequences of their own behavior that has caused great harm, and do what can be done to protect the community, potential victims, vulnerable people, without it having to look like we have lost hope, that we’ve given up on forgiveness, that we have no faith in God’s grace, reconciliation and rehabilitation. It’s not easy. I don’t know the answer; but I do know what God calls us to in Jesus Christ. I myself have walked with people trying to get them to come to terms with things they’ve done, and to find the inner peace that can only come through truth and accepting responsibility. But I’ve also seen hopelessness, and that’s the ugliest thing of all.

Alumni Days are about renewal. Renewing friendships, renewing memories, renewing commitment. Let’s pray today not just for the renewal of these things, but for a new era of renewal in the Church, when we can move beyond the past and into a future that is hopeful. Let us pray for a deep renewal of the spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation in the Church, for peace, and better ways of understanding how best to face up to and deal with our problems in the spirit of the Gospel. Let’s acknowledge that it’s not easy, that there’s no certain way, but that it is imperative: because if we don’t, we will lost everything, we will have given up on everything that truly is of value; we will have embraced hopelessness, rather than the hopefulness of the Gospel. Let’s put law, judgment, condemnation and punishment in perspective and limit them to what is truly necessary for a well-ordered community, realizing that they can never be considered a permanent solution but stopgaps only to gain stability and time for the heart of the Gospel to once again penetrate our communal life as Christians, so that with us and with the

Church, as with God, there will once again be mercy and the fulness of redemption; so that once again it will be evident to the world who we really are.