

Pray for the Victims-All the Victims

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David Dawson is scheduled to be executed at Montana State Prison in early August. If carried to its conclusion, he will be killed by a lethal chemical concoction that will stop his heart forever. As we consider this execution we should reach out to all the victims. We should also realize that Christ called us to protect life. That means protecting babies, mothers, and fathers as well as those scheduled to die for crimes against society. Jesus didn't discriminate between classes of people in calling for the protection of all life – and neither should we.

When we think of the victims of crime, we think first of the family members who have to live with these horrible sins. Bishop Thomas reflected in his June column, "None of us can fully appreciate the pain and anguish they have experienced because few of us have walked in their shoes." He asked us to pray for them, and their families since this time will surely "reopen wounds". As Catholic people we must always be ready to reach out to victims of senseless violence. We should always continue to remember these victims in our prayers.

But let us not forget the other victims associated with capital punishment, and keep them in prayer also.

Who are these other victims? They are the families, and friends of the condemned person. They are the parents of the condemned person, consumed by guilt, who constantly wonder what they did wrong. Bud Welch who lost a daughter in the Okalahoma City bombing said when the bombing is mentioned he feels the pain, but then he remembers how proud he was of his beautiful daughter. On the other hand, Bill McVeigh, the father of bomber Tim McVeigh, says he feels guilt and shame for a son who killed so many innocent persons. Bill McVeigh is one of those other victims.

There are several others we don't often consider who are wounded from these executions. One specific group is prison employees who have known the condemned person for several years. Another victim is the chaplain who walks the final steps with the prisoner, and may be the last person to speak to or touch this human being before the execution. Others wounded are the men and women who strap the inmate to the gurney so the injection of the poison will go into the veins smoothly. Even the warden who gives the final order, and the executioner who pushes the chemicals into the tubes connected to the condemned person's vein can be victims.

For some it may be just a job. For others it could change them forever.

I have read several accounts of prison employees, chaplains, those on the execution team, and wardens traumatized by their part in the death sentence. Donald Cabana, former Warden at Mississippi State Penitentiary in Parchman, tells it this way in his book, Death at Midnight, Confessions of an Executioner. "I had often witnessed the cold, unfeeling violence of inmates, and over time my senses became numb by it. I presumptuously concluded that I was both prepared and well suited for playing the role of executioner. Nothing, however, could prepare

me for what I saw and felt when I supervised my first execution. There is nothing commonplace about walking a healthy young man to a room, strapping him into a chair, and coldly, and methodically killing him.”

Let us remember to pray for everyone who has even the smallest part of an execution: family, friends, crime victims, prison employees, other inmates, and the citizens of this state. It is an ever widening circle which challenges all of us to see these events as a big picture.

Purposely injecting poison into the veins of another human is not merely a sterile procedure, observed by a small number of invited witnesses, where a person is immobilized by restraints and then slowly and silently put to death. It is a heavy burden we in society place on those hired to do our executions for us.

Now more than ever is the time to pray for the victims and a just end to a process that creates so many additional unseen and unnamed victims.