

Death at Midnight

Moe Wosepka, Executive Director, Montana Catholic Conference, March 12, 2009

“I had often witnessed the cold, unfeeling violence of inmates, and over time my senses became numbed 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, methodically killing him.” These are the words of former Mississippi Warden Donald Cabana taken from his book, Death At Midnight, the Confession of an Executioner. They have disturbed me since I first read them several years ago, and they came to mind again a couple of Sundays ago while at a religious gathering with 60 some inmates at Montana State Prison. The scripture reading and discussion were over when one of our team members stood up to ask for prayers for the success of our death penalty abolition bill that is currently at the legislature.

I have learned a lot about the death penalty in the past few years, much more than I would have ever expected to learn. The more I learned the more convinced I am that the death penalty is wrong. It was a gradual process which took much longer for me to start than it did to finish. For far too many years I didn't feel like the death penalty affected me or anyone I knew. The inmates are locked out of view, and the executions are held in the middle of the night behind closed doors. We can only read the press accounts featuring comments from a few witnesses who were in attendance. It's pretty well sanitized.

I have talked to several people who have been directly and indirectly involved in executions. They include staff persons who were part of the execution team, prosecutors who secured the conviction and continued to fight the fight until the inmate was finally killed, and defense lawyers who were with the inmate when he died. All were affected by the killing. No matter how sanitized it is, it is still killing a defenseless human being. Something is fundamentally wrong with that no matter how obscene the crime was this person committed.

Studies show that the death penalty is not a deterrent. It costs more than keeping a person in prison for life because of the more stringent rules for appeals and confinement. It is most often inflicted on minorities and the poor who cannot afford adequate defense. Perhaps the most tragic finding is over 100 inmates have later been found innocent and released from death row. In some cases it took over 20 years to prove their innocence.

But that aside, the death penalty may still make sense in some cases. If it's just the cost, or statistics, or even innocence that was the reason the state continues to kill people in the prisons that may not be enough. It is the ultimate taking of a life that is the compelling reason to abolish the death penalty. Our Catholic faith teaches us that we must respect life from conception to natural death. Life is life and God is the final arbiter of life. Former Pope John Paul II told us that if bloodless means were available to control those who commit horrible crimes then that should be the ultimate punishment.

SB 236 the bill to abolish the death penalty and replace it with life without the possibility of parole is currently waiting a vote in the House of Representatives. Please contact your Representative today and ask them to vote yes on SB 236.