

## Lessons from the vigil, a solution for life Moe Wosepka, Director MCC 8-11-06

The lights from the prison showed brightly against the dark sky. Intense lights revealed concertina wire, and guard towers, but they did not reveal any movement. Movement was halted, because this was the night that David Dawson was to be executed.

About 35 people from Butte, Helena, Missoula, and Three Forks, gathered for a prayer vigil, on a hill overlooking the prison in the final hours before the execution. A blood red moon pushed up from the rolling prairie, and a gusting westerly wind swept sheets of swirling dirt through the glare of the security spot lights. A small crowd of pro-death penalty protesters gathered on the other side of the fence, adding anxiety to an already surreal event. Our group talked, and sang, and prayed. The group on the other side of the fence sat with their signs and waited. At 12:01am Friday, the execution would proceed.

It's been a long and arduous few weeks. The Catholic Conference has been part of a group attempting to stay the execution. We joined a coalition of civic groups, churches, legislators, a former Supreme Court justice, and a former district judge. Our group attempted to show the execution was unconstitutional due to lack of proper protocol in the administration of the chemicals, and we tried to convince the courts that the 8<sup>th</sup> amendment preventing cruel and unusual punishment may be violated. Our goal was not to change the process to make it acceptable to take lives, but to stay the execution until we could work toward abolition of the death penalty in the next legislative session. Not amend, but end.

Press coverage of our efforts, the crime, and the execution has been page one in major Montana newspapers the past couple weeks. Some of the comments I made in one article caused a firestorm of disapproval. The central theme of the criticism is the thought that those opposed to the death penalty only support the murderer, not the victims. The truth is, as church, we do support the victim and offer to reach out to all victims. My work with the poor on our streets, the forgotten in nursing homes, and the ignored in the prisons, these past 10 years, has led me to learn about injustices. The victims of these injustices have been my teachers, and from them I have learned to love the poor and fight for those who have no voice. The Catholic Church teaches life is a seamless garment from conception to natural death. Life is not reserved for the deserving. It is God's gift to all. As Bishop Thomas so eloquently stated, "God alone is the author of life and the arbiter of death".

11:58 pm Thursday: From across the fence the countdown began... 3 minutes,... 2 minutes,... 1 minute. "He's dead" they cried, as they honked their horns, and waved their signs. "Now why don't you all go home and pray for the living?" one of the protesters yelled as they headed for their cars.

Our Lord leads us to answers through difficult situations. Perhaps going home to pray for the living is what we need to do for now. Pray for the survivors of violent crimes, and for the perpetrators of violence, and for all those who are affected by violence. Pray for those who are afraid, and those who are hopeless. Pray for the leaders of this country and this state that a culture of life will be promoted. Pray for our bishop, our priests, our religious and our laity. Pray that our Lord Jesus Christ, Himself a victim of state sponsored execution, will provide us with wisdom, courage, and strength to craft a solution to the death penalty. A solution for life.