

Death Penalty Talk Rev. Robert J. Schneider

Sacred Heart Parish, Tampa, Florida

Just one week from today we will be observing Good Friday. This is the day when what almost happens to Jesus in the Gospel reading for today actually does take place. The people wanted to stone Jesus in the passage of John's Gospel we have just heard. On Good Friday, Jesus is crucified and is finally executed. Those who have seen him as a troublemaker feel he is finally gone. But, of course, we know differently.

Jesus Christ was a victim of the Death Penalty.

On this Friday before Good Friday, I would like to take this opportunity to talk about the dangers of the Death Penalty in our world today and do so as a representative of the Florida Catholic Conference Committee against the Death Penalty for the Diocese of St. Petersburg. I have served in this capacity since 1996. I am Father Robert Schneider, pastor of Espiritu Santo Catholic Church in Safety Harbor. I thank Fr. Andrew for this opportunity to speak. We wanted to reach out to the business and legal community in a special way with this message and I hope that this lunchtime Mass can do just that.

First, just as Jesus was compassionate, we must show compassion to the victims of crime. I can only imagine how it feels to lose a loved one by a murder. The feelings of anger and sorrow and loss have to be overwhelming. But the Prophet Jeremiah speaks of the dangers of seeking vengeance in our first scripture reading today. It can eat us up inside. God's justice is something very different. We can never bring back our loved ones, but we can rise above the violence that claimed them. Being against the Death Penalty is not being uncaring for those who have been left behind by cruelty, but to do all we can to support those who have experienced such a loss...and we need to do a better job of this.

Our teaching on Capital Punishment is consistent with our teachings on abortion, euthanasia and other such life-issues. While the teaching is not absolute, and the catechism of the Catholic Church states this, it is clear that the way in which the Death Penalty is administered today is immoral. We appeal, especially to those in the legal community, to be open to this teaching and to learn more about the Church's reasons for grave concern in how the Death Penalty has been and is being used in Florida, the United States and around the world.

In 1990, the Bishops of Florida said this: The abolition of the Death Penalty would help to break the cycle of violence. It would manifest belief in the unique dignity of every individual and the sacredness of human life. It would acknowledge God as the Lord of Life and it would be more consistent with the spirit of the Gospel.

The United States Catholic bishops have put it in context: Increasingly, our society looks to violent measures to deal with some of our most difficult social problems...millions of abortions to address problem pregnancies, advocacy of euthanasia and assisted suicide to cope with the burdens of age and illness and reliance on the Death

Penalty to deal with crime. We are tragically turning to violence in the search for quick and easy answers to complex human problems...we are losing our respect for human life...we cannot teach the killing is wrong by killing.

Today then, as Jesus is threatened by the Death Penalty in the Gospel reading we have just heard, as Jeremiah calls for an end to vengeance and as we anticipate Good Friday in just 7 days when we commemorate the execution of Jesus, let us examine our hearts and minds of the issue of the Death Penalty and its application. Let's pray for all who have been affected by heinous crimes. Let's also pray for perpetrators, especially those who have seen the errors of their ways.

It's tough to hear the message of Jesus sometimes. On the cross, he forgave those who had put him there. They knew not what they were doing. Do we know what we are doing? Let's be more educated about the issue of Capital Punishment.

We have information available for all who would take it in the church today. And next week, as we commemorate Good Friday, let's pray for an end to all violence as a means of resolving conflict, and pray for the peace and serenity of Easter...and the dignity of all human life