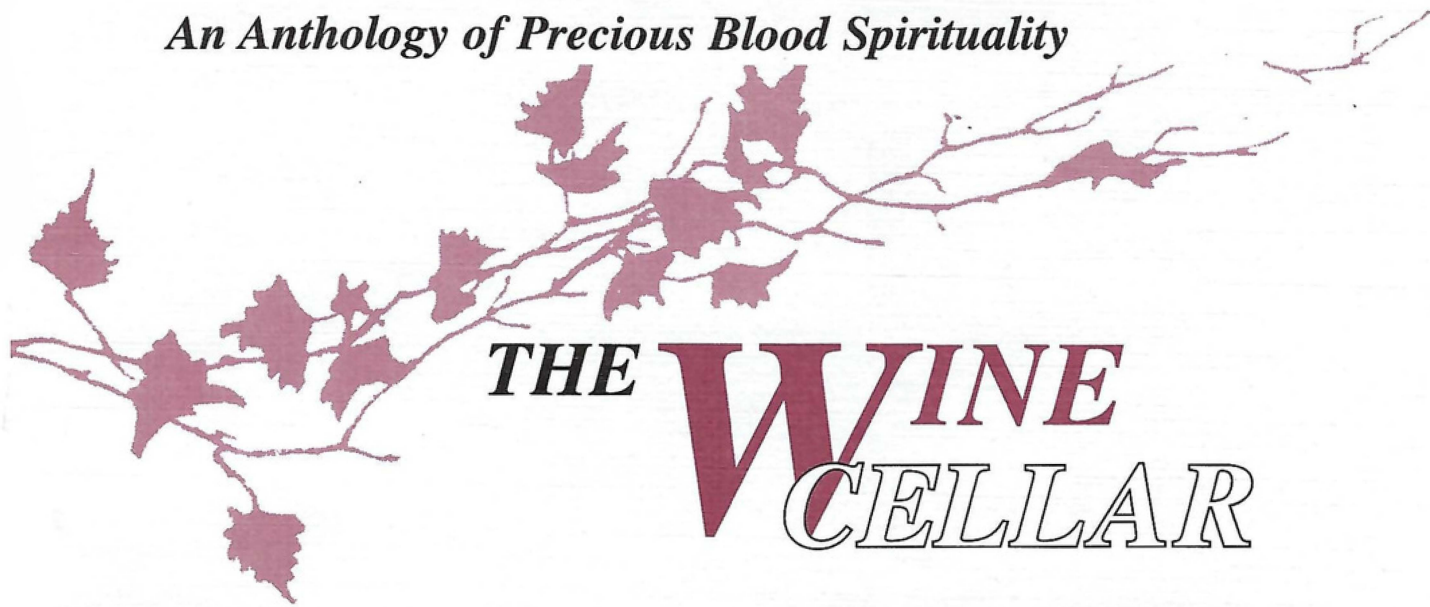


*An Anthology of Precious Blood Spirituality*



**THE** **WINE**  
**CELLAR**

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Death Penalty

*The heart of Jesus  
is the wine cellar  
of the Blood of Christ*

Gaspar del Bufalo

*The*  
**Wine Cellar**

*An anthology of Precious Blood Spirituality*

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## Standing Near the Cross

*Near the cross of Jesus there stood his mother...*

**John 19, 25**

**A**s this issue of *The Wine Cellar* goes to press, the shadow of Timothy McVeigh looms large over the landscape. His execution is scheduled for June 11, 2001. As E.J. Dionne of The Washington Post wrote recently, "McVeigh presents opponents of the death penalty with the hardest test they have confronted in decades." The reason is obvious. As Dionne wrote, "If there is to be a death penalty, the man who killed 168 people in the Oklahoma City bombing certainly deserves it."

Many of those whose loved ones died in the bombing of the federal building on April 19, 1995 sincerely believe that watching McVeigh's execution will help heal the wound and bring some closure. But the wound inflicted by McVeigh is incurable. The scar from his terrorist, horrific act will survive.

So how does one find healing from violence?

I met Sally Peck a few years ago while giving a parish mission in a suburb of Detroit. Sally's mother was raped, beaten, strangled and stabbed to death in her Detroit home. "Her murder was so violent that I wanted no more violence of any kind ever again," Sally told me. "I couldn't watch television. I couldn't stand to have my young children argue. I am grateful Mom raised us with powerful examples of forgiveness, because if hatred were added to my burden of pain, loss and grief, it would have destroyed me."

When Sally told me that she “never hated the person who killed my Mom,” I believed her. “I could not know what in his life had led to that terrible act,” she said. “At the lowest point of my grief, I felt a real assurance that some day good would come from this evil. Mom had always brought good out of bad circumstances.”

Some of that good is now reflected in Sally’s active involvement in Murder Victims Families for Reconciliation. She travels the country to tell her story and speak out against the death penalty. “Not in our name” is the motto of Murder Victims Families for Reconciliation, founded in 1976 by Marie Deans of Richmond, Virginia, as the members seek to abolish the use of capital punishment in this country and around the world.

“The death penalty is a further victimization of the surviving families because we can’t heal while we hold on to hate,” Sally said. “The death penalty would do nothing but hurt us. It would not have prevented her death, won’t bring Mom back, and can’t help us heal. It would add to our pain by holding out a false promise of relief with an execution. It would extend our pain to his family and create more victims.”

Sally’s opposition to the death penalty is a way for her to honor her Mom’s memory. “In her life there was never any trace of vengeance. To ask for the death penalty would desecrate Mom’s memory and all she stood for and taught us.”

Another woman I’ve met along the way who deepened my opposition to the death

***“The death penalty is a further victimization of the surviving families because we can’t heal while we hold on to hate.”***



penalty is Yvonne Del Vecchio. Her son, George, was executed by the state of Illinois on November 22, 1995 after spending 16 years on death row. In a letter to Scripture Press Ministries, which provides Bibles and spiritual reading material to prisoners, Yvonne writes: "Although I had been a Christian for some time and attended a Bible church, George did not trust Christ as his Savior until 1978 when he was in the county jail. He soon surpassed me spiritually, and he was able to carry the peace and courage God gave him throughout his 16 years on death row. If it hadn't been for his faith, I would have been tormented when he was not granted clemency. But George helped me to be thankful for the man he finally became through God's grace."

This mother of a convicted murderer saw the conversion that happened to her son. She never dismissed his crimes or sought to diminish the pain her son caused by the acts of violence that led to his arrest and conviction. But she also recognized how the power of God's grace could transform a human being. "He truly was a different person when God transformed his life," Yvonne wrote. "He had a great deal of sadness and remorse about his prior life, but he experienced God's forgiveness in a powerful way and he tried to redeem the time." While on death row, George's cell was, in the words of a chaplain, "an altar of intercessory prayer and his typewriter a pulpit of evangelism and encouragement."

This issue of *The Wine Cellar* confronts a culture of death that views capital punishment as a viable option to stem the tide of violence in society from the vantage point of Precious Blood spirituality and the charism of reconciliation it inspires. Father Dave Kelly writes from his many years of standing in the breach between the violent one and the victim. It is in this most uncomfortable place where people who espouse precious blood spirituality must learn to stand in solidarity.

Sister Alice Gerdeman sees capital punishment as "a symbol of acceptance of violence, revenge, and of having given up on people." She challenges those who "know in their being that the Precious Blood of Jesus is the source of all life and love" to "immerse the sinner in that source of life."

Adorer of the Blood of Christ Stephanie Mertens compiled the statements from major religious denominations in the centerfold of this issue. She documents how even though we may not be victims of violence personally the death penalty is “a personal matter for everyone.” Sister Stephanie reflects on the movement of “restorative justice” which “recognizes the need for both the victim and the offender to experience justice.”

Two O’Fallon Precious Blood Sisters, Ruth Kertz and Esther Hogan, draw on their extensive background in prison ministry to share stories of how the “cycle of violence can be broken through humane, hopeful and reflective means.” They suggest the present moment may provide the best opportunity in years to abolish the death penalty. But as Adorer of the Blood of Christ Therese Wetta suggests, such hope can only be accomplished by putting “our spirituality into action.”

As Precious Blood people, we stand near the cross with people like Sally Peck and Yvonne Del Vecchio. In the words of a poem Yvonne sent me, we lose ourselves “in the shadow of the cross...lost in his infinite Grace. (We) kneel at the cross and behold His face.”

May we draw courage and grace from the reflections in this issue as we stand in this most difficult and dangerous place.



# A Spirituality of the Precious Blood and the Death Penalty

By Dave Kelly, CPPS

A year or so ago, I was called to the house of a neighbor of a man who lost his wife and three children in a fire. He worked nights and was working when the fire broke out. His whole family died. That night, a night like so many other nights, he lost his two little boys, his baby girl, and his wife. As I walked over, I thought, “What can I say to him? What possible good can I do? What words would even make sense?” I could not imagine the devastation.

I entered the house, which was overwhelmingly quiet, and went to the room where the man sat on the bed with his head resting against the wall. His face was literally only inches from the wall in that small and darkened room. I didn’t know what to do. Should I stand and wait outside the door? Did he want to be alone? Would I be an intruder? Would I be unwelcome in his pain? Not really knowing what I should do, I finally just went in and sat on the bed next to him and put my arms around him. I just sat there, uttered a word of sorrow—nothing more.

It was a most uncomfortable place to be. I felt useless, powerless, like there was nothing that I could do. I also felt that for him, at least, perhaps I represented the God that just took his family away from him. While he didn’t show it, I could only try to imagine the anger that he must have had toward God. Even in the midst of the uncertainty, I knew this is the place I was supposed to be. No, had to be. It isn’t the words we speak, it is where we are willing to put ourselves that counts.

The spirituality of the blood of Christ can not be lived out in comfort. It is a spirituality that can be found only as we stand with those who know suffering, those who know discomfort, those who know the struggle of life. The spirituality of the blood of Jesus lives among those who suffer in the shadows of so much violence, so much pain, and so much hurt.



## Reconciliation: Standing in Solidarity

**I**n the Cook County Jail in Chicago, I was talking to a young man and he told how he felt like a nobody, a low-life. He had a turbulent relationship with his father. He had been told that he would never amount to anything. He had been beaten down—literally and figuratively. He told stories of how his father would come home at night after work and just be filled with rage. He would wake him up and beat him. This broken spirit had been in and out of jail for the last few years. He had lost most of his family. He had no friends; even his mother had pretty much given up on him. He felt his life was worthless—of no value to anyone. You could see the pain in his eyes. He felt that no one really wanted to get close to him. After our talk, after we spent some time together he looked directly at me and said, “Thanks, you make me feel better inside.”

Reconciliation is a willingness to stand in solidarity. It is a willingness to listen to the stories. It is not about something that we do; we leave that to God. Reconciliation doesn't depend on us. It isn't our work, but rather the work of God. But we must be willing to cooperate. We must be willing to walk in places that cry out for healing. We must be willing to go to places that scream for someone to listen. Those who feel alone in the world need to know that somebody hears them and that somebody cares what is happening to them.

But reconciliation is also what happens to me when I dare to put myself in the thick of things. It is then, in the midst of the pain and the uncertainty, when there seems nothing but destruction, we understand that the human spirit has not been destroyed.

When people find out that I work in jails in Chicago, they often ask how I do what I do. There are always two sentiments underlying that simple question. First, they are convinced that they would never do it themselves, that it is beyond them. And second, there is the suggestion that there is no hope. But the truth is that precisely because of our powerlessness, there is so much hope. Because of my inability to literally set the captives free, there is an incredible amount of hope.

Last summer a young man I know well was shot twice. He was only 15 and he nearly died. He suffered a gunshot wound to the stomach and back. He had just left the church after talking with me and no more than five minutes later he was shot.

For a good long time I talked with youth and parents of the neighborhood about the violence and the fear they had. It always seems so wrong that the children are afraid to walk and play in their own neighborhood, to stand in front of their own home. We talked a long time about not feeling safe. About feeling as though they could not be themselves. Parents shared stories of frustration and fear about not being able to protect their children.

The other part of this story is that I also knew the shooter. He was not just a name to me; he had a story. I knew his friends and his family. After leaving the hospital bed of Alberto, I went to see the one I knew who was locked up for the shooting. He looked at me tentatively, knowing that I knew the one he had shot. He had read it in the police report—how the young man had just left the church. We talked a long time. We talked about his future and what was in store for him in the countless court proceedings. But we also talked about the young man he shot and his family.

So we stand in the midst of the pain: the pain of the victim, the wrongdoer and the community. We stand in the middle, in the very thickness of life, listening to the story. Often we are not able to do anything to change things. But when we stand in solidarity with those who know suffering, we witness to the love of God and we allow God to bring forth healing.

### **Stained by the Blood**

**A** fifteen-year-old in juvenile detention told me that he hasn't seen his mother since he was eight years old. One night she didn't come home and he hasn't seen her since. He doesn't know where she is. He thought that she was out with her friends—that had happened before and usually she came home after a day or two. "She was into drugs," he said. But this time she just never came home. And to this day, more than seven years later, she still hasn't returned.

A spirituality of the Precious Blood is not about having answers; it is not about making sense out of abandonment or explaining away the pain. It is not even saying we know how to live in the midst of the pain. The spirituality of the Precious Blood is the willingness to be present, to stick around, and not run away. My redemption is tied up in the redemption of that little kid who has been abandoned by his mother.

Some years ago someone came into the old convent building where I lived—it served as a kind of foster home for those who could not live at home. This young man came in and stabbed one of the kids who lived there seven times. I remember desperately trying to hold my hands over the knife wounds. I tried to keep him from bleeding to death, knowing that you are supposed to put pressure on the wounds. As I held him and put my hands against the knife wounds, I, too, was covered with blood.

Am I willing to be stained by the blood? Am I willing to put myself in the midst of the suffering, the pain, and the hurt? Am I willing to take that risk, step out on a limb? Or, do I keep a safe and comfortable distance?

Capital punishment is one of those issues that evokes a strong response and cuts to the core of what we believe about blood, about issues of life and death. It is messy. It is an emotional issue filled with the pain and anger at the violence of the crime. There is also the frustration over what to do:

- *What do we do when someone has been deeply hurt by another?*
- *How do we make it right again? Can we?*
- *How do we stand with a mother who has lost her child to terrible violence? Certainly that mother will never be the same. She will never be able to go back to the way it was before her child was killed. She will never be able to allow herself to dream for her child again. What do we say to her?*
- *What do we say to the mother of the one whom committed the crime?*
- *What do we say to the one who did the violence—the wrongdoer?*

Capital punishment demands that we not abandon the presence of God in the midst of the suffering and the hardships of all those touched by the horrible crime. In the midst of that pain and confusion, it is only God who can bring us to a new place. It is only God that can offer a new dream.

## When Death Has the Upper Hand

**T**he Israelites were a marginalized people pushed out further by being in the desert. “You don’t live in the desert,” Bob Schreiter says, “you survive in the desert.” In the desert, death seems to have the upper hand. But the spirituality of the Precious Blood is not some superficial proclamation, but rather proclaims life in a world where death seems to have the upper hand. It is not a proclamation that the comfortable can make to those who are uncomfortable. It is not a spirituality that we can preach from a safe distance. This spirituality is rooted in the very midst of the poor and the marginalized.

I have been on both sides of the aisle. I have sat with the family of the victim too often. I have sat more often with the family of the accused, the wrongdoer. But the pain is similar. Hope seems to be pushed to the limit as one is overwhelmed by the broken dreams and utterly shattered lives. Perhaps the worst of it is not being able to dream for your loved one. The dreams that we normally have for our son or daughter are taken away. In the midst of that pain, in the midst of that confusion and the broken dreams, I try to hold on to the belief and witness to a God whose love is not partial but plentiful.

Bob Schreiter talks about how the spirituality of the Precious Blood offers a surviving message “that the desert will not prevail.” It offers a vision of new existence and affirms a basic human dignity. This is why the spirituality of the Precious Blood makes so much sense to those who are at the very edge—because it proclaims them not as worthless, but as the sons and daughters of God, most highly favored by God. It is the difference between a violence that destroys me little by little, and a violence in which I am able to see the face of God present.

The violence is real. There are statistics that say violent crime is on the decrease. But we live in a world that has seen more wars recently than in years past. The difference is that the wars tend to be civil wars—not a war of nation against nation, but people against people. More and more children are being caught up in this violence. We are shocked at the school shootings and the 10-year-olds charged with murder who are often tried as adults.

Our response is to pass more laws to protect society—as though we can legislate our way out of the violence. While our laws are meant to protect us, they strike out against the poor and the minority. They strike out against the very ones who seek the protection of the law.

The NAACP reported in January 2000, that almost all capital cases (83 percent) involve white victims, even though nationally only 50 percent of the murder victims are white. Since the reinstatement of the death penalty, 11 whites have been executed for killing blacks while 149 blacks have been executed for killing whites. The odds of receiving the death penalty are four times higher if the defendant is black. The National Council on Crime and Delinquency report reveals that youth of color experience more severe treatment than their white peers at every stage of the juvenile justice process—leading to devastating over-representation of minority youth in confinement across the nation.

African Americans are incarcerated at a rate of 6.6 times the rate of whites. Blacks make up 12 percent of the population but are 35% of those on death row. Of the 73 juvenile offenders on death row, two-thirds are minorities (51 percent black, 18 percent Latino).

The ratio per capita of white to black drug users in the US is roughly 1-1. But the sentencing rate of whites to blacks for drug possession is 1 to 10. The amount of crack you need to get a five year mandatory minimum is five grams, but for powder cocaine it's 500 grams—which is interesting once you learn that 75 percent of those arrested for powder cocaine are white, and 90 percent of those arrested for crack are African-American.

## Law and Order: Justice for All?

A priest called us from the suburbs. One of his parishioners had been arrested and incarcerated at the Cook County Jail. This priest was a good guy—supported the ministry often—so I went to see his parishioner as quickly as I could. I thought I would find a frightened kid. But by the time I got there and called him down, he informed me that he was about to leave. His family had bonded him out. The law worked for him; it served him well. But law must uphold the dignity of all human beings.

One of the great temptations is to see the law only from our perspective. But as Bob Schreiter has pointed out, we must begin to see law from the perspective of those who live without the benefit of law; those for whom lawlessness is the norm. We need to begin to see the law from the perspective of those who do not benefit from the law.

The law given to Moses and the Israelites by God was to offer them life and dignity in the midst of the desert. It was not a law that was meant to further burden the people. God knew that without the law they would perish. It was to set them as a new people—a law covenanted in the blood, in life—even in the midst of their suffering.

Law is the dream of people in Guatemala or Kosovo or Sierra Leone or a host of other places as they suffer the tragedies of war and torture. To have the law, in the midst of so much lawlessness, is to experience dignity. But in our criminal justice system, the law does not reach out to all; it does not include those of color or the poor. The very law meant to give life and offer dignity robs people of life and hope.

Jesus cautioned the Scribes and the Pharisees as they used the law to keep people in place or to protect what they had. Jesus warned of a law that didn't reach out to all people. He encouraged them to see the law as that which promotes human dignity.

## Reconciliation: Hearing the Cry of the Blood

**T**he hardest thing about forgiveness is that it seems to betray the past. There is a sense that if we forgive the one who perpetrated the violence, we are saying what the person did wasn't so important. But so often it is so bad, so harsh, so cruel, and the pain very real. Family victims of violent crime wrestle with the sense of betraying the one they love. Of not being there for them. They need to tell the world of their pain and the violence done to their family.

Capital punishment from a distance seems to do that—to vindicate, to have the final word. But it never does. The death penalty can never be an answer to the pain. Never. Violence can never heal—it only begets more violence. Statistics say that states with the death penalty experience a higher violent crime rate than those states without the death penalty.

The image of the blood keeps us from spiritualizing away the harsh realities of the pain and the hurt. Suffering is no less real or painful just because it will someday be avenged. Blood does not allow us to forget that. We dare not step over the pain. It dare not be ignored. So often as I listen to the story of someone who is in jail, knowing that there is really nothing I can do, the time ends with a sense of being heard. When one feels heard, the dignity that continues to be assaulted is, for the moment, restored. How important it is to feel as though we have been heard.

I went to court with a young man the other day. He had collected his accomplishments to show the judge. He wanted the judge to see what he had done—awards, artwork, poetry. He wanted the judge to see him as more than just a “thug.” When he offered the judge the folder, the judge opened and immediately closed it saying, “I don't need to see this.” And literally threw it aside.

We are called to stand in the midst of the pain—not welcoming the suffering but willing to be present to the one who suffers. It is here that the blood—the blood of salvation, the blood of redemption, stains us.



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When I went to visit the father whose family had been killed in the fire, I didn't walk up to him and tell him that his suffering was to be lifted up. I didn't tell him that his suffering would bring him to a greater human dignity. I merely sat with him and said to him that I was willing to walk with him, to stand with him in the midst of the pain, confusion, and hurt.

It was an untidy moment. His suffering seems so cruel, but as we talk and remember, as his story is told, not just in words, he comes to see how his blood is mingled in the blood of Christ. It is precisely in the suffering of Jesus, that hope is born.

It is precisely in that place, sitting in a darkened room, face against the wall, with no appropriate words to speak or words to ease the pain, that I am raised up, too. It is there that I experience the power of reconciliation.

Reconciliation is the work of God. It makes both the victim and the wrongdoer a new creation. It is not just about righting the wrongs, but recognizes that we are in a new place, a new creation. The old narrative of the destruction of violence is met with the new story of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus.

The road to Emmaus was a road of broken promises, of violence and the hopelessness of the disciples. Until they recognized Christ walking with them. Then it became the road of redemption. They would never go back to who they were before because now they were a new creation.

After the resurrection, Jesus appeared to the apostles and showed them the wounds of the crucifixion. He carried those



wounds even into the new life. We cannot go back to the way things were before the violence, but we can find ourselves in a new place.

It is with the victim that Christ begins. That is consistent with the Hebrew Scriptures in which God favored the orphan and the widow. In the ultimate victim, Jesus, God begins the process that leads to reconciliation of the whole world in Christ.

Reconciliation is the work of God with our cooperation. It begins with truth telling—the story being heard. The dignity of being listened to. The dignity of knowing that my pain is not ignored or set aside.

In South Africa during the Truth and Reconciliation process, there was a mother who lost her son. He disappeared. He had later been found murdered. When she approached the court and was asked what she wanted, she said that those who did the terrible crime—the previous government—should erect a tombstone with his name on it. She wanted to be heard. She wanted them to hear her story and to admit that her son had died. That was the beginning of reconciliation.

Reconciliation starts with the victim. It is the overwhelming love of God that causes the victim to reach out to the wrongdoer and begin the process of reconciliation.

As we discuss our charism, we may be tempted to follow other communities as they work in one or two areas of ministry—education or hospital or parish—as a way of drawing us together. But what keeps us together in ministry is that we are willing to stand on the fringe and be among those who are suffering—no matter where we might find them.

We have a spirituality, a language, to share with one another. Perhaps it is the way we minister—willing to be uncomfortable, to live among the tension with no real answers—that sets us aside and makes us a people dedicated to the blood of Christ.



## For Reflection

Recall some of the uncomfortable places you have been called to stand in your life, your ministry. How did these situations where you encountered the suffering Christ reflect for you the spirituality of the Precious Blood?

How have you been “stained by the blood”?

What do you do when you have been deeply hurt by another? How do you respond? What steps toward reconciliation do you follow?

How is the language of Precious Blood spirituality helpful to you in confronting a culture of violence and vengeance, death and despair?



*Dave Kelly, ordained in 1982 as a Missionary of the Precious Blood (Cincinnati Province), has worked in jail ministry in Chicago for more than twenty years.*

# Breaking the Cycle of Violence: *Abolishing the Death Penalty*

By Alice Gerdeman, CDP

**P**recious Blood of Jesus, Source of life and love, have mercy on us.” These words ran through my mind and heart as I reflected for this article. Where do they come from? They are not part of the usual prayer of my religious community. Perhaps they linger in the memory of the prayer of my childhood in a parish pastored by Precious Blood Fathers. Maybe my mother, inspired by the Sisters of the Precious Blood who taught her, repeated them in our family prayer. I just know that they come to my mind now and have been there before.

Blood is the source. Blood also has a source. Perhaps that source is where we need to begin. Our blood comes from our parents. For nine months we get our nutrients, our oxygen from our mother’s blood. Our blood is not our own. We are called upon to share it, to pass on life and to promote healing when we “give” blood or are transfused with the blood of another. The mysteries of life flow through us. Strength and weakness is blood centered.

We share daily in this source, Eucharist. We are hooked up to our source. We receive the blood. We are transfused again with the source of spiritual life and love. We are renewed to go forth as a strong person, with strong, rich blood, with abundant life and divine energy to share with others. We know the richness and strength of the Blood of Jesus as we encounter a culture of revenge and death.

The use of the death penalty in our country is not about spreading life, being transfused with a new chance. It is about spilling blood, stopping life, killing the source of pain in society without offering a chance for healing. The over 3,500 people on death row today are viewed as holders of death, transmitters of

evil. Life is to be denied them. Harshness is to be accepted; forgiveness withheld. And we hold the source of life. He floods my being. How are we to share life with these “least of my brothers and sisters”?

## Original Sin

**I**n an article in *America*, Joan Aker, H.M. calls us to begin by going back and rethinking our understanding of original sin.<sup>1</sup> The Roman Catechism teaches that Adam and Eve failed the test. They fell. They had to suffer the consequences of that sin. Life was to be harsh for the ones who disobeyed God’s law thereby changing the nature of the world. No longer were we to live in a paradise. Harmony was gone. No matter how hard humans try, our efforts to overcome the physical and moral effects of evil cannot be fulfilled in this life.

God determined to send us a savior, Jesus Christ. Jesus would not have come, would not have shed His blood, died and rose if there was no original sin. God is good and forgiving of us but also extracted a terrible price for sin. Jesus, God’s Son, had to give up His life to set us free. Death was a punishment and Jesus’ death could overcome our need to suffer punishment and God’s need to seek satisfaction. Society seems to accept this theology.

Joan Akers reminds us of another strand of theology preached by Duns Scotus and others. In it we are reminded that “Christ is firstborn in all creation. Before anything came to be, Christ was (Col. 1:15-17).” Christ predated sin. Christ, the head of creation, was the model God had in mind for the human race. Christ’s coming to earth was not an after thought, an emergency plan to make reparation when humans got off the right track. “Our world, in its process of becoming, was programmed from the beginning by the creator to witness a Christogenesis, even if a mythical first couple had never sinned.”<sup>2</sup>

Christ becoming flesh was the eternal plan of God. God loves. Love has to share itself and offer itself to take risks for that which

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<sup>1</sup> Aker, Joan , “Creationism and the Catechism,” *America*. (Dec. 16, 2000). p. 8.

is loved. The Word was to become flesh. God was willing to risk giving up divinity not so that sin could be redeemed but so that we, humans, might better learn how to be completely human. Death would not be a punishment but a transcendence at the conclusion of the life process of birth, growth and finally the fullness of life in God. Our society seems to have difficulty accepting this theology.

How we see God, how we see sin, and how we see death enter into our understanding of the use of the death penalty. A God who extracts punishment, who sent the Son to suffer and to die, to shed his blood so that we might be forgiven, might also accept the use of the death penalty. Those to be executed could offer their suffering for their own sins and the sins of others. They could join their physical pain and mental anguish to the suffering of Jesus and gain merit for themselves and others. They should be “happy” in their remorse and to give up their human life as Jesus did. And we, while not happy to see a brother or sister lose life in such a planned and horrible way, could learn a lesson from the execution. We, too, are subject to punishment for our sins and must make up for our evil ways. Does this speak of our God?



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<sup>2</sup> Aker, Joan , “Creationism and the Catechism,” *America*. (Dec. 16, 2000). p. 8

## Death as Model of Transcendence

**A** God who planned from all eternity to come to live among us and to model for us the way to be divinely human is horrified by the use of the death penalty. Death is not a punishment. Death is an experience of transcendence. It is a natural good that happens as the close of human life on this earth. Life may not be taken in expiation. The shedding of blood is not a means of luring God into forgiveness or people back into harmony. Blood is a life force. Life is sacred. When the sacredness of life is violated, those who know in their being that the Precious Blood of Jesus is the source of all life and love immerse the sinner in that source of life. Mercy, forgiveness and caring form a warm tide so rich with life that healing must take place. The Source of Life gives forgiveness and the ability to forgive.

For 2000 years we have known Jesus and contemplated his words and his example. We watch Him live with strong gentleness and die a victim of violence. We revere the cross, His instrument of execution, and know that His death led to resurrection, not violent retaliation and punishment. The Gospel words are clear and the message is ignored. Society continues to demand vengeance and despite all evidence claims that the use of death as punishment helps individuals and society. Our call is to live the truth of love defying the common wisdom. We are to begin with our own attitude toward life.

Every human is created in the image of God. This is our truth. We learned it at a young age. No matter what we do or what choices we make, we were created good. That goodness remains though perhaps hidden by the effects of years of abuse, mental illness and/or sinful choices. “None of us is the sum total of the worst act we have committed.”<sup>3</sup> The task of the followers of Jesus is to reveal that truth again, to find it, transfuse it and bring it back to life.

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<sup>3</sup> Wisconsin’s Roman Catholic Bishops, *Public Safety, the Common Good and the Church: a Statement on Crime and Punishment in Wisconsin*. (Sept. 1999).

We start with self, opening our woundedness to the healing and renewed strength of the Precious Blood. Knowing our Godness we live in our world in that Godness and trust that we will find it in others if we dare to look—to trust. This may not be easy but if we don't try, who will?

## Death Penalty as Symbol

**T**he death penalty is a symbol of acceptance of violence, revenge and of having given up on people. Abolishing it from society is part, only a small part, of what we must challenge. People who commit violent crime are usually victims of violence themselves. All violence needs to be lovingly confronted as do the systems that make violence acceptable. As symbol the use of the death penalty presents us with a concrete issue around which we can focus our energies. We can and must ask the hard questions and learn the hard facts, let them change our hearts and then speak from our convictions. In the words of Gandhi, “we have to see the change we wish to see.”

Nonviolence is a search for Truth. That search is constant. We don't ever really possess truth. The God of truth is so much larger than our understanding. The search must be internal and external. It demands sacrifice. As we move from greed, selfishness, possessiveness, and dominance to love, compassion, understanding and respect major changes take place in us as individuals and in society. Our society seeks to possess everything—not just material goods. We want to possess harmony and peace. We want to rid society of those who take away our security. We will kill in search of peace. The more possessions we have the more we try to secure them from those who might take them. “What will happen to me? My family? My house? My job? My neighborhood?” In this insecurity we develop systems that we think will make us secure. People are often willing to submit to a system they know to be unjust rather than risking the loss of what they have. True liberation comes when we are free from the fear that controls our lives. Then we realize that we don't know all the answers, that our ways are not the only ways. We know, too, the value of the search for nonviolence in thought, word and deed. We become willing to

*In the words of Gandhi, “we have to see the change we wish to see.”*

risk trying to live in a system that is not dependent on violence, even on killing the most dangerous criminals for safety.

When we have faced the violence of the use of the death penalty to insure our safety, we have just begun the task. *Responsibility, Rehabilitation and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice*, the recent statement of the US Catholic Bishops, urges us to reach out to crime victims and offenders. The bishops encourage us to work toward the reform of the complete criminal justice system where “victims are often ignored, offenders are often not rehabilitated, and many communities have lost their sense of security.”<sup>4</sup> They further tell us that the Catholic approach to crime and criminal justice “will not tolerate crime and the violence that threatens the lives and dignity of our sisters and brothers, and we will not give up on those who have lost their way.” They call for a system that is less retributive and more rehabilitative and call on all of us to “become involved in restoring communities to wholeness.”

Those are mighty tasks. They demand a rethinking of not only our criminal justice system but also the way we personally treat each other and the systems that dictate everything from parish life to how we relate to each other as a global community.

### **Conversion is the Goal**

**W**e believe that love conquers all, that love is all powerful and can help us and others be really free. Therefore, we reach out to those without love, confident that the addition of love to their lives will heal and bring

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<sup>4</sup> United States Catholic Conference, *Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: a Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice*. (Nov. 2000).



out their good. Nonviolent action has as its goal conversion. If the opponent or system refuses conversion, nonviolence gently points out the benefits of accommodating to the requests or wishes of the other. Lastly, if the opponent is determined not to change, the practice of nonviolence simply removes the opponent from the source of power and control.

Nonviolent people refuse to cooperate with the violent system and allow the situation to continue. It is not brave or unusually generous to write to those on death row. It is a simple act of love that changes hearts. It is not courageous to sign a petition or even to circulate one to friends and coworkers. It is an act of love that influences laws so that they fulfill their real purpose of building community. It is not daring to ask political candidates to use their power to protect life and to put into place programs that allow those incarcerated to find their talents and eventually a place in society. It is notifying those in power that we expect that power to be used for the good of all, especially those that may be the most difficult and pained. We are not special when we teach that difficult lesson of “love your enemy” and try to live this principle in our own lives.

This act of love is the basis of our Christian life. It is not unique to challenge our every attitude to see if love is our real motive. It is love that is the essence of the lifestyle we pledged when we were confirmed in our baptism and accepted the vowed life of women and men religious.

To be nonviolent is not a goal. It is a means of showing society that we have been transfused with the source of life and love. Flowing in us and through us into society is love. It gives life; it is strong and gentle. Because of love miracles of healing take place in persons and in society. It not an easy process but we know it is possible and will be.



## For Reflection

How do I understand original sin? Suffering? Death? What words from my past have formed my attitudes? Are there some I wish to rethink?

Do I accept the gift of forgiveness and the gift of being able to forgive? How do I help others in need of learning how to forgive in a society that often tells us that if we forgive we are weak?

What do I know about the criminal justice system? What do I need to know if I am to work toward its reform?

What keeps me from actively opposing the death penalty? What are my fears? What do I need from the Source of Life and Love?



*Sister Alice Gerdeman, CDP is Director of the Intercommunity Justice and Peace Center in Cincinnati, OH.*

# Making a Statement

*The use of the death penalty tends to brutalize the society that condones it. In denying the humanity of those we put to death—even those guilty of the most terrible crimes—we deny our own humanity, and life is further cheapened. Nothing is achieved by taking one more life, adding one more victim. By inflicting lethal punishment, society descends to the level of violence and cruelty that it rejects in criminal behavior. We must set an example based on the values of compassion, decency, and reconciliation.*

**—United Presbyterian Church**

*Whereas, the use of the death penalty in a representative democracy places citizens in the role of executioner, Christians cannot isolate themselves from corporate responsibility, including responsibility for every execution, as well as every victim.*

**—Presbyterian Church (USA)**

*Capital punishment ignores corporate and community guilt.*

**—Reformed Church in America**

*Whereas, we share the belief that capital punishment of a person convicted of a crime is an unsatisfactory response which demeans and brutalizes society, therefore be it resolved ...that it is a faithful reflection of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ...to encourage society not to use capital punishment as a penal response to crime.*

**—Church of Latter Day Saints**

*The nature and extent of the punishment...ought not go to the extreme of executing the offender except in cases of absolute necessity: in other words, when it would not be possible otherwise to defend society. Today however, as a result of steady improvements in the organization of the penal system, such cases are very rare if not practically nonexistent.*

**—Pope John Paul II,**  
*Evangelium Vitae (#56)*

*The death penalty perpetuates a cycle of violence and promoting a sense of vengeance in our culture. We oppose capital punishment for what it does to all of us as a society. Increasing reliance on the death penalty diminishes all of us and is a sign of growing disrespect for human life.*

**—United States Catholic Conference**

*We cannot teach that killing is wrong by killing. We have reached the point in one very visible case where a jury has urged the execution of the person who murdered the physician who was destroying unborn children. The cycle of violence diminishes all of us—especially children.*

**—United States Catholic Bishops, 1994**  
*Confronting a Culture of Violence*

*We...believe the life of the victim is further devalued by the taking of another life as punishment.*

**—Church Women United**

*In this regard, we are especially concerned with what the death penalty does to the society that inflicts it.*

**—Fellowship of Reconciliation**

# Death Penalty: A Personal Matter for Everyone

By Stephanie Mertens, ASC

**I**n preparing this article I learned of the cruelty of each of the methods of carrying out the death penalty. It is never humane! I saw the mounting statistics on executions in the 38 states that have Capital Punishment. The United States is the only Western industrialized nation that practices the death penalty, and is by far the nation with the largest number of people on death row, at present 3600 youth, women and men. Racial bias and poverty influence who is given the death sentence. There is clear proof that the death penalty is not a deterrent to murder. Innocent persons are in danger of execution. Vengeance and retribution are the motivation behind the death penalty and it does not heal the pain of the victims. Indeed, the violence of the death penalty only begets more violence.

There are many excellent groups working to abolish the death penalty. Other national and international groups are working for a moratorium on the death penalty as a step towards ending the death penalty. My study revealed that there are groups working to help the victims of crime and there are excellent programs of restorative justice which reach out to criminals, victims and the community at large. People in favor of the death penalty often change their view when they realize there are alternatives to the death penalty that protect our society.

Another dimension of the death penalty began to surface strongly for me as I was preparing this article. With so many on death row in our country we need to ask if we have any connection to the youth, women and men on death row? Do we play any part in their loss of life through the horrors of the death penalty? Who

is really the executioner? Does the death penalty destroy not only the life of the one who is executed, but diminish the life of every human in our society?

## The Web of Life

Our churches and many in our society are searching for life giving responses to these questions. A growing awareness of the connection and oneness of all recognizes that in God all humanity is one. We must acknowledge that our brothers and sisters on death row share in this oneness. St. Paul wrote that “in him all things were created,” and “...in him all things hold together (Col.1, 16-17).” As the Seamless Garment Network suggests, when John Donne said not to “ask for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee,” then it must be “that in the life of the convicted murderer the web of life of each of us is at issue.”

A number of challenging commentaries on the part that each of us plays in the imposition of the death penalty warrant our attention. In *Dead Man Walking* Sister Helen Prejean, CSJ writes of the death penalty: “It involves all of us. We’re all complicit. Government can only continue killing if we give it the power. It’s time to take that power back (p. 130).” Quoting Camus who said, “Resist, do not collaborate in any way with a deed which you believe is evil,” Sister Prejean writes that “we must persuade the American people that the government killings are too costly for us, not only financially, but—more important—morally (p. 197).”

Dr. Howard Zehr of the Mennonite Central Committee quoted in the Catholic Conference of Illinois ‘Truths Against the Death Penalty #7’ reflects on the personal responsibilities of each of us for the death penalty. “Christians have a responsibility to be ferment, to be prophets. This includes calling the state to higher standards of behavior...The death penalty raises many moral issues, including: does the death penalty enhance or demean the value of life? Is the death penalty a necessary way to express society’s moral condemnation of murder?”

He writes further how “we also need to find those roots of violence and injustice that are in all of us. We need to

acknowledge our own complicity and failure that we have sinned and fallen short of what we could and should be. We are all offenders and all victims. We all need redemption. Only a foundation in that realization will allow us to build a future where violence will be unnecessary.”

Jerry Henderson, a prisoner from Atmore, Alabama writes in A Christian Perspective newsletter produced by Project Hope To Abolish The Death Penalty, “If someone says they don’t believe in an eye for an eye, killings sanctioned by the state, but refuse to do anything about it, they are as much a part of the problem as the problem itself.”

Unless we stand up now, our very blood, our children will one day suffer at the hands of the system we have helped set up and have allowed to function. Another prisoner, Michael B. Ross on Death Row in Somers, Connecticut writes in a personal letter to religious orders:

*I am working hard to get information out about the death penalty moratorium movement. I am hoping to get this information out to every religious community in the United States - a huge job that I cannot hope to accomplish on my own. I am hoping that you will be willing to help me by using your communications network to get the enclosed materials out*

***The death penalty raises many moral issues, including, does the death penalty enhance or demean the value of life? Is the death penalty a necessary way to express society’s moral condemnation of murder?***



*to all of the members of your religious order. The death penalty will be abolished in this country eventually. But if all communities of faith bind together as one voice on this issue, that day will arrive much more quickly. I hope you will help with this effort.*

As we look at this crucial issue we are called to consider the diminishment of all of us, of our whole society through the presence of the death penalty. The use of the death penalty is an action fraught with bitterness and an unwillingness to forgive that affects us emotionally, spiritually, socially, and even physically. The following insight offered by Martin Luther King Jr. shows the effect of the vengeance and hatred on our society: "Mindful that hate is evil and a dangerous force, we too often think of what it does to the person hated. But there is another side we must never overlook. Hate is just as injurious to the person who hates. Like an unchecked cancer, it corrodes the personality and eats away its vital unity."

### **Restorative Justice**

**T**hrough the challenges before us on this issue are many, an encouraging movement taking place in the United States today is the effort to transform the criminal justice system from retribution to restoration. The movement is working for what is known as "Restorative Justice." The Illinois Conference of Churches in the May 1999 issue of its newsletter Public Policy Profile offers the following material on Restorative Justice, a justice that moves from a punitive and retribution approach to a model of restoration, reconciliation and healing. In 1997 the U.S. government's National Institute of Corrections wrote in reference to Restorative Justice: "A revolution is occurring in criminal justice. A quiet, grassroots, seemingly unobtrusive, but truly revolutionary movement is changing the nature, the very fabric of our work".

Restorative Justice is based on relationships of individuals to individuals, of individuals to society, and of institutions to individuals. It is grounded on the belief that the cry for justice must always be a cry for justice done with mercy. Restorative



Justice calls for building a society that honors the individual dignity of every human being and the centrality of relationships that give meaning to life. Based on biblical shalom—making whole and restoring dignity—Restorative Justice strives to right relationships by caring for the victim and the offender.

Restorative Justice recognizes the need for both the victim and the offender to experience justice. For the victim, it means being supported by their community, being able to speak their feelings, to seek restitution, and for some, the opportunity to grant forgiveness. For the offender, it offers an opportunity to be made aware of how their actions have harmed the victim and the community, to accept personal responsibility for those actions, to

## **Games Children Play: Death Row Marv**

**A growing number of people in our society are concerned about the influence of the violence in our society on our children. Michelle Malkin wrote about a horrifying new toy called “Death Row Marv” (*St. Louis Post Dispatch*, August 18, 2000). “Death Row Marv is sitting on my desk, strapped to an electric chair,” Malkin writes. “This ‘toy,’ marketed for kids 13 years old and up, came from a local comic book store. It’s a half-foot-tall replica of a violent character...and comes with the chair, wired helmet, floorboards and electrocuting switch.” For \$23.95, you, too, can purchase the “deluxe box set” and share the cheap thrill of executing the murderer.**

**According to one newspaper account, 65,000 Marv dolls have been produced and sold across the country. The National Organization of Parents of Murdered Children has a simple request: “If you are as disgusted with McFarlane Toys as we are, and wish to let them know that murder is not entertainment, you can contact them at: Todd McFarlane Productions, P.O. Box 27228, Tempe, Ariz. 85285-7228.”**

understand the need for penalties, to repent and to apologize, to make restitution when possible, and to be forgiven. Under Restorative Justice, the community is responsible for supporting victims, holding offenders culpable, and ensuring opportunities for offenders to make amends where both the victim and the offender can find healing and be restored to wholeness. Communities are also responsible for addressing the root causes of crime and to reduce victimization in the future.

The churches, in their role as prophet, have a significant role to play in the wider community's acceptance of Restorative Justice. According to Mennonite pastor and attorney Duane Ruth-Heffelbower, leadership by the churches in discerning the idea of Restorative Justice, confirming it and lending their support can be a powerful influence. By preaching the biblical understanding of mercy, forgiveness and healing leading to reconciliation, churches can lead the wider community away from embitterment and hard hearts. "When Christians witness to the love and power of God, the point they are making is that God has a plan for humankind", says Ruth Heffelbower. "One part of that plan is a special concern for the poor and powerless. A special concern that justice be done with mercy."

It may be helpful here to consider the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu as he assisted victims and offenders of the atrocities of apartheid move to peace. "We are dealing with things that are very, very deep," Archbishop Tutu said. "It isn't easy to ask forgiveness or to forgive."

As we speak of the death penalty and the issues of public policy and law related to it we need to recognize that capital punishment reflects matters of conscience. As J. Bryan Hehir, dean of Harvard Divinity School said in a homily at the Florida State Capital on the "ethic of life" and the death penalty, this is about "that mysterious inner core we call conscience. It's not just about state, society, law, and politics. It is at the very depths of our being. That is what life is all about."

There is much that we can do to support abolition of the death penalty: write letters to legislators and to people on death row;

gather signatures for the moratorium effort; join Catholics Against Capital Punishment; and take part in a vigil at the time of an execution. Answer the call to the depth of our own inner being, to that place where we enter into prayer. There we can help “heal the collective unconscious of the entire human community.”



## For Reflection

Am I in any way responsible for the death penalty?

What effect does the death penalty have on our society?

What is the church’s position on the death penalty?

What can I do to help bring about the abolition of the death penalty?



*Adorer of the Blood of Christ Stephanie Mertens is Coordinator for the US/ASC Office of Peace and Justice and currently serves on the Human Rights Initiative Committee of the Precious Blood Leadership Conference which is working on abolishing the death penalty.*



# Seizing the Moment: *The Ministry of Reconciliation*

By Sisters Ruth Kertz, CPPS  
and Esther Hogan, CPPS

*All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.*

—2 Corinthians 5: 18-19

**T**here is a crying need in the world today for the Good News of Christ who is our Reconciler calling each of us to be instruments of reconciliation wherever our journey in life take us. This crying need is loud and clear as we reflect on the death penalty in our country today. The time to act is now. There is no better time than the present as movements and countless conversations are taking place across the country calling for a moratorium on the death penalty that hopefully will lead to its abolishment. Now, more than ever, there seems to be a growing awareness of the death penalty and all the implications surrounding it. We need to seize the moment.

Seizing the moment, the Precious Blood Leadership Conference (PBLC) sponsored Proclaim Jubilee workshops in 2000-2001 to raise the consciousness of its members about the death penalty. Through a collaborative effort, members and associates in the nine participating religious congregations that comprise the PBLC committed themselves to further their mission and their Precious Blood spirituality by focusing attention on the issue of capital punishment.

It saddens us to know that the United States is the only industrialized nation that practices the death penalty and has the largest number of men and women on death row. In a country that has achieved so many remarkable advances in so many areas and fields, we seem to drag our feet when it comes to our criminal justice system, particularly regarding the death penalty. Actually, our present criminal justice system is based on Aristotle's concept of justice that a person will get what they deserve. This has led to a system with an attitude of revenge and retaliation as a way to right a wrong. In many ways, after all these years, we still don't get it as we cling to the image of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." This is certainly inconsistent with the life and teaching of Jesus. It also contradicts our Precious Blood mission of reconciliation, forgiveness and mercy.

As Christians and especially as religious who profess a Precious Blood spirituality of reconciliation and forgiveness, we look to the Gospel and life of Jesus as our model and mentor. The call of the Gospel impels us to make no distinction as to the worthiness or unworthiness of those in need of healing. One of the beauties of the Gospel is Jesus reaching out to all people regardless of state of life, but especially those most in need.

We see a thread throughout the Gospel of peace not vengeance, love not hate, justice not revenge. Revenge is counter to God's message of compassion and mercy. The death penalty is often looked upon as revenge and retaliation and used as an answer to a violent act. Certainly, the answer to violence is not more violence. But the good news is that this cycle of violence can be broken through a humane, hopeful and reflective means. Our spirituality

***Our present criminal justice system is based on Aristotle's concept of justice that a person will get what they deserve. This has led to a system with an attitude of revenge and retaliation as a way to right a wrong.***

as Precious Blood people calls us to a life of understanding, compassion and mercy.

## Stories from the Front Row

All human beings, including those behind bars, are made in the image and likeness of God. Every incarcerated person is a gift from God, and as such, all have a right to respect and dignity regardless of the crime they may have committed. The right to take that life away does not belong to society, persons or to any form of public authority.

Neither of us have had much direct experience ministering to death row inmates, but our 12 years in prison ministry put us in contact many times with men and women serving sentences just short of capital punishment. Many of these men and women are looking at natural life and/or 50 years without parole. A number of years ago the state of Missouri had two women on death row. Both since have had their sentence reduced to life without parole. One of these women, Fran, is an elderly woman that could pass for anyone's gentle, quiet and reserved "Granny."

We happened to be on the prison grounds the day Fran arrived and was escorted into the prison. We can still picture her mild, gentle-like but serious expression as she wondered what would become of her in that environment. What has brought her to this point in her life? It is not for us to judge or excuse her but to take the opportunity to reach out in love and compassion to her as she endures her pain and loss during her incarceration. To this day, Fran still appears to be that typical "Granny" that any child could cuddle up to in her lap. To her credit, Fran has made the best use of her time in spite of setbacks and disappointments. She has become a symbol of respect for the other women and is a mentor to these women in many respects.

We also recall very vividly the first execution that took place after the State of Missouri reinstated the death penalty. Standing silently and prayerfully in solidarity with a small group of people who were holding lighted candles and thereby making a public statement, we were immersed in all the clamor and noise of

***The death penalty surely violates our dignity  
as citizens, as it neither heals individuals  
nor restores society.***

another group of people anticipating the event with eagerness and a sense of joyfulness almost in a circus like atmosphere.

Inside was a lonely man, John, about to meet his God. This God had become a loving and comforting God to him. While on death row, John had become a support and instrument of peace for fellow inmates on death row. It is indeed a sobering thought when one stops to think that our government is acting on our behalf when taking the life of another. The death penalty surely violates our dignity as citizens, as it neither heals individuals nor restores society. On the contrary, it promotes a harmful attitude of revenge and condones violence as an acceptable way of dealing with violence.

As members of a community named for the blood of Christ, we must take our call seriously to be ministers of reconciliation and forgiveness. In our opposition to the death penalty, we hope to challenge our nation, our families, our friends and ourselves to distinguish between justice and revenge. As people of faith who claim a Precious Blood spirituality of reconciliation, we are committed to living our lives with compassion and mercy. What does that look like in our lives and how do I live a life of reconciliation from day to day? How are we nurturing our spirituality of transformation and reconciliation?

There are no pat answers that fit all. Each person must answer that for his/herself. As two Precious Blood sisters committed to living our charism of reconciliation, we find that we can only attempt to do this if we are well grounded in a life of prayer and are nourished by the Eucharist as our way of life. The Eucharist is the center or core of our lives as we encounter Christ in his passion, death and resurrection. Deepening our own relationship to God through prayer and faith sharing is essential in helping another person experience God's healing - a powerful source.

During the years of our prison ministry, attempting to carry our value of being Christ's presence to those who are broken, forgotten, and ignored of the world, we found that we didn't bring Christ to these men and women in prison. Christ was there all along and was very much alive and present in prison. We came to believe that there are no prisons strong enough to keep the Gospel message out. No prison walls are thick or high enough and not even the double razor-wire fences can ever stifle this message of love and compassion.

We were often edified and awed to see men and women behind these walls reach out to one another in true concern and true kindness. There were many times when we would be called to the prison at any hour to talk to a man or woman who had received bad news, a disappointment, a setback or a family crisis that left them feeling helpless and hopeless. They needed a caring and a listening ear of someone whom they could trust to be present with them. Just being there, supporting, affirming and assuring them of God's love for them was all they needed.

Men and women on death row are no different in their need to have someone reach out to them in the same way. Our presence meant far more than any answers because answers were not what they sought from us. To us, that is reconciliation. That is what God was asking of us. Living our charism of reconciliation and acknowledging and accepting our own pain, our own brokenness helps us to truly be instruments of healing for others.

### **Instruments of Reconciliation**

**I**t is by offering God's helping hand to someone else that we experience it the most in our own lives. Being Precious Blood members our name is to be synonymous to forgiveness, mercy and unconditional love as we are called by Christ. The persons sharing their pain, their hurt, their loneliness with us enables us to be instruments of reconciliation and healing to them.

We remember one particular night we received a call from prison to come and see a group of women who were very distraught, upset and fearful. They had just seen one of their own die unexpectedly in their dorm. They were afraid and worried as



soon a sense of helplessness and hopelessness began to spread among them. We spent some time with them just allowing them to express their feelings and fears. They sought no answers from us but only our presence sharing their concerns, their worries and their fears.

Again, to us, that is reconciliation and healing. Healing takes place when you accompany someone in their pain, when you affirm others in their search for peace as they make their journey through life. Reconciliation takes time, as it is a slow process. When you pass from the pain to healing, from the hurt to reconciliation, then you can bring the Resurrection message to suffering people and to the world. Life is not just about pain, suffering and even dying, it's about hope, love, and faith in the resurrection as promised to us in the Gospel. The Paschal Mystery is about loving, hoping and believing in this resurrection.

That hope, that love and that belief in the resurrection is what we as people who are committed to the Precious Blood need to extend and share not only with the men and women on death row but with the families of the victims. We must also stand with these families of the victims in their pain, sorrow and anger and be that reconciling instrument as we affirm our belief that God gives all people the opportunity for conversion, reconciliation and peace.

In the Gospel, Jesus speaks of two commandments, love of God and love of neighbor. He puts one on par with the other. Love of neighbor is not less significant to the love of God if we take Jesus' message seriously.

Reaching out to the victims of crime and accompanying them as they walk in their sorrow, hurt and anger is a slow painful process but one not without hope when we believe that a loving comforting God walks the journey with us. Crimes committed against persons evoke very strong emotions and we need to be present to these people with an understanding heart by engaging them in dialogue and prayer. This is a difficult place to be because often the victims want to turn to retribution and revenge as a way to deal with their pain and loss. However, in all honesty that does not bring about genuine peace of mind or heart.

***Crimes committed against persons evoke very strong emotions and we need to be present to these people with an understanding heart by engaging them in dialogue and prayer.***

Learning to forgive is not easy but it is possible by taking one step at a time and one day at a time. There are many stories, written and unwritten, about families of victims who do not believe in the death penalty. They have said, they do not want the death penalty to be carried out on the person responsible for their personal loss and pain.

Many of the victims' families have taken a pro-active part in speaking out against the death penalty. Others have gone public and made it known that they have forgiven the person who caused them this loss and pain. Still others have paid a great price in taking this stand and have experienced of being misunderstood, accused of disloyalty and causing the breakdown of family relationships. Yet they are able to forgive the person and can live with a true peace of mind and heart.

As religious leaders, we must speak out and lead the way to abolish the death penalty. We need now more than ever to speak out for human rights, both for men and women on death row as well as for the victims and their families.

The death penalty only creates more victims who suffer loss, pain and anger. We must find ways to support all people associated with the death penalty and strive to facilitate forgiveness and healing. Members of Precious Blood Congregations have been entrusted with this great ministry of reconciliation as handed down to us by Jesus Himself.



## For Reflection

In what ways can I respond to the Precious Blood charism in relationship to the death penalty?

How am I called to further understanding of the death penalty and the living out of my Precious Blood spirituality?

How is my own transformation bound up in solidarity with the oppressed and marginalized persons on death row?

Can I expect reconciliation and forgiveness in the world if I am not ready to forgive?



*Sisters Ruth Kertz and Sister Esther (Damian) Hogan are members of the Sisters of the Most Precious Blood (O'Fallon, MO). Both Ruth and Esther spent twelve years as prison ministers in the prisons within the Jefferson City Diocese working with men and women.*



BEARING WITNESS:

# Taking an Active Stance Against Death Penalty

By Therese Wetta, ASC

In the Northern Hemisphere, winter has yielded to spring and Lent has given way to Easter. Alleluias ring and flowers sing a new song of life. In a spirit of faith I join in the singing with gratitude and joy.

Yet there are so many in our society who do not know the fullness of the message of redemption, who live with a vision of retaliation and revenge. Again I recognize that reconciliation and forgiveness are truly the fruits of a process of conversion and transformation.

In December 2000, George W. Bush was named president of the United States and *Time* magazine's "Man of the Year." For me the darkness of winter seemed more dark than usual at that time. As governor, this "man of the year" allowed a record number of death-row executions to be carried out in Texas in 2000 and showed no signs of wanting any other option for death row residents. The need for embracing the Light of the Risen Christ seems greater and more necessary now than in prior years.

The death penalty is being imposed and used with increasing frequency in the United States. In Texas and Virginia alone, nearly 300 executions have occurred since 1976, many of them in the last three years. The sheer quantity of persons executed and the knowledge that some were juveniles when they committed their crime, some probably were innocent, and some lived with mental limitations call us to passionate action rather than passivity.

I feel an intense need to not only embrace the redemptive presence of Christ but to proclaim its message whenever and however and to whomever the opportunity presents itself. This resolve is strengthened when I read about situations such as the

one described in the next paragraph or hear of the number of people who plan to travel to Terre Haute for the execution of Timothy McVeigh.

Governor Bush's home, Texas, is also the state in which the Department of Criminal Justice has posted on the Internet a long list of minutiae related to its execution of death-row inmates. According to *US Catholic* (November 2000), "the site shows the actual execution recordings in the handwritings of the executioner and lists the contents and costs of the lethal-injection mixes used as well as all of the executed prisoners' last statements and final meal requests." And if this doesn't seem sufficiently morbid, the department's spokesperson noted that "the web site is the most 'dynamic and rewarding communications tool we have'." The darkness grows darker and the need for the Light of the Risen Christ increases.

I find myself angry with this man and the "Texas mentality." Yet I know that the prevailing (and unredeemed) mentality of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" permeates the thinking of many in our country. Though this mentality is beginning to lessen, the conversion process is slow. Is our conversion such that we have gained the courage not only to oppose the death penalty but also to actively and passionately speak out against it, to demonstrate against it, to write letters and work to change legislation?

If not, my wish is that each of us could spend some time in prison with only one person who has let God work in his or her



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life while incarcerated. The saying “There isn’t anyone I couldn’t love if I knew their story” comes to mind. I believe their story would re-energize our charism and evoke greater action on the part of more of us.

## **Jude: A Story of Conversion**

**M**y thoughts wander to the military prison and Jude (not his real name), a young man who lied about his age to enter the military and escape his home situation.

Imprisoned for a crime committed while in the Army, Jude was angry with everyone and the world. The other inmates called Jude Geronimo because he had single-handedly taken on six correctional officers in one altercation. For this offense he spent months in solitary confinement.

After his release from “the hole.” Jude came to the Sunday evening gathering held by Catholic volunteers. Over time he moved from self-imposed aloneness in the back of chapel to being among the others. Volunteers tried to involve him more in the community. Inviting Jude to read Scripture and having received several refusals, a volunteer realized that Jude might not be able to read. Such was the reality.

With encouragement Jude attended GED classes, learning to read and eventually passing the GED exam. His attitude changed. He began to talk about what he was reading and also began attending Eucharist. After refusing several invitations to participate in a weekend retreat, Jude finally consented to “give it a try”. I had the privilege to participate in this REC (Residents Encounter Christ), a conversion experience for Jude and many of us on the team. Jude not only shared some of his story with his fellow inmates but he also risked tears in their presence. And he embraced Christ in a personal way.

Today Jude is anticipating the completion of his sentence within this decade. He remains a changed man, one for whom God is his salvation and friend. Jude was assigned the job of sacristan at his last prison (he’s been moved several times), something he never dreamed could be a reality in his life.

Jude is but one example of why we, as family of the Precious Blood, must be involved in eliminating the death penalty. God creates each human being good. Human blood is precious because the Blood of Jesus was poured out for it. “Our preciousness, uniqueness and individuality are not given to us by those who meet us in clock-time—our brief chronological existence,” Henri Nouwen writes in *Life of the Beloved*, “but by the One who has chosen us with an everlasting love, a love that existed from all eternity and will last through all eternity.” Do we believe in the preciousness of each person on death row? Do we believe that Jesus entered into redemption for each of these persons? Is my faith sufficiently strong that there is no doubt God loves each unconditionally? If yes, how do we speak that message when the death penalty topic surfaces?

### **God’s Presence in Each Person**

“**I**n Jesus we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace lavished upon us (Ephesians, 1:7).” The wounded men and women in our correctional institutions often have little knowledge of God and no belief in their goodness. For some, no one ever told them they are good or lovable. For others, the message is so distant that it has been forgotten.

There is no or only a vague awareness that redemption and God’s unconditional love are already gifts given to them. Disbelief is the most typical response to the word that the magnanimous forgiveness of God is theirs for the asking.

If we really believe that the Spirit of God pulses through the bodies of all persons in this world, what can we do to help more people not only understand but embrace this basic faith stance of the spirituality of the Blood of Christ?

The person who has committed a violent crime is still a son or daughter of God, a person whom God sees as “good” in his or her deepest being. Jesus lived mercy and compassion. He gave us an example in his forgiveness of Dismas on the cross next to him. Can we lobby for and justify life sentences rather than the death

penalty, allowing time for God's love and forgiveness to become real in the lives of these convicted persons? I believe this is a necessary expression of our charism today.

In the words of Joan Chittister, our Precious Blood spirituality demands that we “give presence to those who would otherwise not be heard at all and to hold the filter of the gospel before all our burning eyes until, finally, the world begins to see what a heart steeped in the Precious Blood has come to see—God's presence here, now, in everyone”.

Violent circumstances can have cruel consequences in the lives of children. Others deny their preciousness their goodness,; their blood becomes expendable. The violence perpetrated on them is often visited by them on others. The current national policy is really no different. Vengeance, the taking of a person's life for the violent act committed, is the stance. This attitude is antithetical to the spirituality of the Blood of Christ, an invitation to put our spirituality into action.

In their recently released pastoral, *Responsibility, Rehabilitation and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice*, the U.S. Catholic Bishops write, “As Catholics, we need to ask the following: How can we restore our respect for law and life? How can we protect and rebuild communities, confront crime without vengeance and defend life without taking life? These questions challenge us as pastors and as teachers of the Gospel.”

These questions also challenge us as men and women living Precious Blood spirituality. “Through Jesus God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross (Col 1:19).” How do we let our spirituality come to life regarding those on death row and the elimination of the death penalty from our country? There are small steps we can take—prayer, studying documents, writing letters to legislators about abolishing the death penalty, sending thank you letters to Governors who have suspended executions in their states while extensive study continues. There are larger steps we can take—being one of the persons praying at the prison when



an execution is scheduled, attending and/or testifying at a legislative hearing on the issue, signing the *Moratorium Now!* pledge being promulgated by Sister Helen Prejean and Quixote Center.

There is tremendous power and strength in the Blood of Christ. Gaspar del Bufalo, Maria DeMattias, Theresa Weber and Anna Brunner were so convinced of this fact that they sought to bring the message of Jesus' love expressed in the shedding of each drop of his precious, life-giving blood to each person. They worked tirelessly and boldly on behalf of those without a voice because they knew the dignity of each person and the price given for the redemption of each.

As a result they suffered persecution at the hands of their neighbors and even the state. Our visionaries knew without a doubt that "now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near through the blood of Christ. For Jesus is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us...so then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God (Ephesians 2: 13-14, 19)." Sisterhood, brotherhood, and unity—we are called to speak and live this message of human solidarity to both the criminal and the victim of crime, in prison and outside it.

Joan Chittister's challenge to us in 1993 is as powerful now as then. "The congregations with the embracing heart of a Gaspar and the visionary spirit of a De Mattias and the unwearied soul of a Brunner and the openness of a Weber know that the purpose of human speech is to give presence to those who would otherwise not be heard at all and to hold the filter of the gospel before all".

If the spirituality of the Blood of Christ is truly alive in us, we are compelled to commit ourselves to pursuing justice without vengeance. If our passion about the Blood of Christ not being shed in vain is vibrant, we are impelled not only to be informed about the issue of the death penalty but also to take action with and on behalf of those with little or no voice about it.

I offer this Benediction prayer as an aid to becoming more courageous, more passionately involved in the death penalty issue, and more reconciling and compassionate with those who cannot see what we see—God’s presence here, now, in everyone.

*May God bless us with discomfort at easy answers, half truths, and superficial relationships, so that we may live deep within our hearts.*

*May God bless us with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that we may work for justice, freedom and peace.*

*May God bless us with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation and war, so that we may reach out our hands to comfort them, and to turn their pain into joy.*

*May God bless us with enough foolishness to believe that we can make a difference in this world, so that we can do what others claim cannot be done.*

Amen



## **For Reflection**

How can we protect and rebuild communities, confront crime without vengeance and defend life without taking life?

How does the spirituality of the Blood of Christ influence your position on the death penalty?

What steps can you take NOW to become more active in seeking to end the death penalty?



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*Mindful that hate is evil and a dangerous force, we too often think of what it does to the person hated. But there is another side we must never overlook. Hate is just as injurious to the person who hates.*

*Like an unchecked cancer, it corrodes the personality and eats away its vital unity.*

—Martin Luther King