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A death penalty discussion for high schoolers

Mary Ann McGivern | Nov. 27, 2012 NCR Today

I'm an invited speaker to a Catholic high school class this week to talk about punishment, rehabilitation and forgiveness. The students were discussing that abortion is wrong, but they didn't see why the death penalty would also be wrong. Their teacher didn't know enough about issues of imprisonment and sentencing and was relieved when the bell rang. So she asked me to come to the next class.

It made me look up the four kinds of justice. I could remember distributive and restorative, but I'd forgotten procedural and retributive from my moral theology studies.

My first question will be along the lines of: What sort of punishment is right for a person who kills someone else? It's a real question for me. Thirty years ago in Missouri, the time served was about 12 years. Sentences in Europe still run about 10 years, even for killing a policeman or soldier. But here, the death penalty is often on the table. Life without parole seems to be to be meted out as arbitrarily as death sentences. And men with the sentence of life with parole do die in prison, despite good behavior and staff recommendations for release.

Another way to get started is to ask the students how they feel about the state killing a person in our name. Is it OK to kill a killer?

But I hope to push on past punishment through rehabilitation and repentance to forgiveness. The point I want to make is that these are all distinct concepts that stand alone. Forgiveness doesn't depend on repentance; repentance doesn't result from punishment.

We confuse them. That's why parole boards are often unwilling to release an inmate if the victim or the victim's family object. They mix up the capacity of the family to forgive with the capacity of the inmate to build a new life. Whether the family can forgive does not depend on whether the individual is able to repent. Execution, of course, closes that door of restorative justice.

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