

Status of abortion, death penalty in Catholic teaching makes little sense

Bill Tammeus | Mar. 20, 2013 A small catholic

A few weeks ago, a friend who teaches at [a Catholic girls' high school](#) [1] in Kansas City, Mo., invited me to hear former "M.A.S.H." TV star [Mike Farrell](#) [2] (he played B.J. Hunnicutt) talk to students about the death penalty.

It was an engaging hour as Farrell, reared a Catholic but no longer active in the faith, described the many ways he stands against capital punishment. Farrell is president of [Death Penalty Focus](#) [3] of California, which works to support alternatives to capital punishment.

As I sat there among 50 or so young women being challenged to change the world for good, I was grateful for the Catholic church's consistent opposition to the death penalty but mystified by why the church seems to give much more attention to its official opposition to abortion.

Many Catholics would say they are against both because of their desire to hold all of life sacred. Thus, work against the death penalty is in harmony with what they would call a pro-life position in opposition to abortion. And surely there's something to be said for such consistency.

But as someone who used to write *The Kansas City Star's* editorials against capital punishment, I have difficulty giving equal weight to the death penalty and abortion.

In the case of prisoners on death row, we have human beings who have been around for years, having long proven viable outside the womb -- people who may be capable of repentance and who, thus, may be rescued from misspent lives. Beyond that, we also have discovered that in a shocking number of cases, we have human beings who may well be not guilty.

By contrast, in the matter of abortion, we have a bundle of cells that one day may be born. But learned and sincere people disagree on the question of whether and when those cells constitute a legally protected person.

Given those differences, does it make the most sense to devote more of the church's energies and resources to stopping the legal execution of an already-born person or to stopping the legal procedure that would terminate a pregnancy?

I vote for the former, even though I believe abortions should be rare but legal because in a few cases, abortion may be the least evil of a series of evil choices.

Are there Catholic leaders -- ordained and lay -- who work actively against the death penalty? You bet. And I admire their work.

But the widespread reputation of Catholic leaders is that between the issues of abortion and capital punishment, their focus is overwhelmingly on abortion. It's a misplaced emphasis and tends to reinforce the view that the

church -- or at least certain portions of it -- is rigidly ideological on some issues.

Even the [U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' website](#) [4] gives the impression abortion is more important than capital punishment, and not because it's listed first alphabetically on the "[Human Life and Dignity](#)" site [5]. Rather, under "Abortion," there are four subcategories listed. Under "Death Penalty - Capital Punishment": none.

Even the tone of the website's language is different in these two areas. For abortion, there is a willingness to tell even non-Catholics what to believe: "... the Church's opposition to abortion -- based on the inherent dignity and equal value of every human life -- is the only moral choice, even for nonbelievers."

Words about the death penalty are less strident: "The death penalty no longer serves a useful purpose in protecting society, and it ends the offender's opportunity for conversion, halting the action of the Holy Spirit on his soul for eternity."

Part of Mike Farrell's message to students was that capital punishment is a public act of the state done in the name of its citizens. Abortion, on the other hand, is -- or at least should be -- a private action of an individual. So why isn't the former matter the higher priority for a church interested in the common good?

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[1] <http://www.ndsion.edu/>

[2] <http://mikefarrell.org/>

[3] <http://www.deathpenalty.org/>

[4] <http://usccb.org/>

[5] <http://usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/>

[6] <http://billtammeus.typepad.com/>

[7] [http://www.amazon.com/They-Were-Just-People-](http://www.amazon.com/They-Were-Just-People-Holocaust/dp/0826218601/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1299296756&sr=1-1)

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