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Turning the death penalty into a resurrection

by Tony Magliano

Making a Difference

“We are Easter people and alleluia is our song!”

This joyous exclamation proclaimed by St. Augustine of Hippo sums up the central Christian belief that in the raising of Jesus to glorified life, God has conquered sin and death. And God offers that same extraordinary gift to you and me. This is something to really get excited about!

The late Indian spiritual master, Jesuit Fr. Anthony de Mello, put it this way, “Extend your arms in welcome to the future. The best is yet to come.”

But the cross always comes first. In this imperfect life, suffering comes to everyone. But Christ does not cause our suffering. So much of human suffering is caused by human sin.

Our human sinfulness ultimately led to Jesus’ suffering and death on the cross. But it’s also important to understand that Jesus’ crucifixion was in part made possible by one of the many structures of sin developed by humanity: the death penalty.

The ancient Roman Empire’s use of crucifixion demonstrated how cruel human sin can be. And modern-day capital punishment continues to demonstrate a similar cruelty.

In the United States, condemned prisoners have been and can be executed by hanging, firing squad, electrocution, gas chamber or lethal injection.

Since the U.S. Supreme Court’s reinstatement of the death penalty in 1976, there have been 1,325 executions, the Death Penalty Information Center reports.

According to Amnesty International, 57 additional nations, including Iran and North Korea, continue to practice capital punishment.

But on a bright note, 140 countries, including the United Kingdom, Canada and South Africa, have abolished capital punishment in law or practice.

And on March 18, the Maryland state legislature voted to repeal its death penalty statute. Upon Gov. Martin O'Malley's promised signature, Maryland will become the 18th state to repeal the death penalty.

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Former death row inmate Kirk Bloodsworth, who was exonerated after DNA evidence proved his innocence, said this repeal means no one in Maryland will die for a crime he or she did not commit.

Killing does not bring peace. Forgiveness does. This is the lesson we can learn from Bud Welch. Before Timothy McVeigh -- convicted of killing Welch's daughter and 167 other people in the Oklahoma City bombing -- was executed, Welch asked himself, "What does Bud Welch need to do to move on?" In reflection, he realized that only forgiveness leads to reconciliation and healing.

He realized that executing McVeigh would be an act of vengeance and rage. "And vengeance and rage," he concluded, "are the very reasons that Julie and the 167 others were killed."

We have a right to be protected from dangerous persons, and sentences of life without parole can help provide that protection. However, the death penalty does not protect us. It hurts us. Capital punishment causes bitterness and violence to fester in our souls. It makes us less human, less God-like.

May Christ's resurrected victory over sin and death inspire us to nurture a forgiving heart and a civilized response to evil. May we live like the Master, in the knowledge that violence only begets more violence and that justice at its best is tempered by mercy.

The God of mercy is calling us to reject "solutions" based on vengeance and death and live instead as life-affirming disciples, always remembering that "We are Easter people and alleluia is our song!"

[Tony Magliano is an internationally syndicated social justice and peace columnist. He is available to speak at diocesan or parish gatherings about the principles of Catholic social teaching. His email address is tmag@zoominternet.net.]

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