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Woman advocates repeal of death penalty as part of unconditional pro-life policy

Sr. Camille D'Arienzo | Aug. 6, 2013 Conversations with Sr. Camille

Catherine Jarboe, 45, is director of Catholic state networks and organizations for Catholic Mobilizing Network (CMN) to End the Death Penalty. Its mission is to proclaim the church's unconditional pro-life teaching, especially in its application to capital punishment and restorative justice. I began our conversation by asking what this job entails.

Jarboe: CMN works to prepare Catholics for informed involvement in campaigns to repeal state death penalty laws and expand or inaugurate restorative justice programs. Ending the death penalty is a state issue, so we work to lift up the Catholic voice in the movement state by state, and we're making progress. Six states in six years have passed repeal legislation, and in each state, Catholics were at the vanguards. We're a ministry of the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet against the death penalty and a lay collaborative of the USCCB.

***Sr. Camille*: Do you find that Catholics are as well-informed about the church's position against the death penalty as they are on other pro-life issues?**

No, and that's why we're here, to clear things up.

Why do you think this is?

One reason is that the church's position on the death penalty has evolved over time to the catechesis of today, outlined by Pope John Paul II. There's a sort of "generation gap" on the issue. Plus, the teaching is absolutely clear, but proponents of the death penalty use its last line to manufacture ambiguity and confuse people. The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains that "the traditional teaching of the Church does not exclude recourse to the death penalty, if this is the only possible way of effectively defending human lives against the unjust aggressor. If, however, non-lethal means are sufficient to defend and protect people's safety from the aggressor, authority will limit itself to such means" (CCC 2267 [1]). And so, the test of whether the death penalty can be used is not the gravity of the offense, but whether it is absolutely necessary to protect society. The catechism adds that today, "the cases in which the execution of the offender is an absolute necessity 'are very rare, if not practically non-existent' " (CCC 2267).

Pope John Paul II's perspective differed from that of some of fathers of the church, including Ambrose and Augustine.

Yes. They felt the state has the authority to administer appropriate punishment, including the death penalty. However, as Italian Franciscan Gino Concetti wrote in *L'Osservatore Romano* in 1977, "No matter how heinous the crimes ... [The offender] does not lose his fundamental right to life, for it is primordial, inviolable, and inalienable, and thus comes under the power of no one whatsoever."

And so, even if the judicial process was without flaws and death sentences were perfectly applied, Catholic pro-

life teaching is emphatic -- we must still oppose the death penalty.

How do you promote Catholic opposition to the death penalty?

At CMN, we educate the lay community through our programs and materials on the church's teachings on the death penalty. We facilitate respectful and informed discourse within the Catholic community and the community at large, and we encourage informed Catholic involvement in the public debate. We have many varied resources -- free on our website [2] -- for lay leaders, clergy, youth ministers, teachers, advocates and anyone interested in learning more about the Catholic teaching on this issue and the secular reasons to abolish this racist, unjust system, which, by the way, is also tremendously biased against the poor.

Catherine, what fueled your passion for this concern?

My desire that people understand the fullness of the Catholic pro-life message. Our church's position on this sometimes-controversial question of the death penalty is vital piece of our pro-life teaching. Lots of pro-life Catholics and Christians are only pro-innocent-life?that's not what our church is calling us to. Our church teaches that all life must be respected and protected from conception to natural death, not simply from conception to natural birth. And as a Catholic, I believe strongly that the true measure of every institution in society is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of every human person.

Plus, I think it's worth noting what our bishops have said: that by opposing the death penalty, we remove any doubts that might arise about the sanctity of human life in all its stages, including the unborn, the aged, the infirm.

When did you become involved in the issue of capital punishment?

When working on pro-life issues for another national Catholic organization, I uncovered this one and the controversy interested me, mostly because I couldn't understand why there was a controversy at all.

Can you name specific influences?

CMN's executive director, Karen Clifton, whom I met while directing policy efforts for another organization, really opened my eyes. She began her work against the death penalty in 1996 in Houston, when her social justice and advocacy projects intersected with those of one of our founders, St. Joseph Sr. Helen Prejean. Together in 2008, Karen, Sr. Helen and other Catholic leaders spearheaded the formation of the Catholic Mobilizing Network. Karen's dedication to restorative justice is inspiring -- borne from her work with families of death row inmates.

Working with Vicki Schieber is a gift. Her beautiful daughter, Shannon, was raped and murdered in 1998. Since this tragic incident, Vicki and her husband, Sylvester, have dedicated their careers and lives to ending the death penalty. In addition to promoting repeal in many high schools and university classes, Vicki manages the CMN Mount St. Mary's University office and runs workshops. She's a published author and has served on state commissions on capital punishment. Most recently, she helped lead efforts for repeal in Maryland. She inspires me. Despite her deep sorrow over the murder of her daughter, she brings light and hope to many and does all this in the name of her Catholic faith.

Vicki and Sylvester must have a deep faith to be so committed, despite the murder of their daughter.

I am blessed to work with many wonderful people. Another is Sr. Ilaria Buonriposi, a Comboni Missionary Sister, who heads our Spanish-speaking outreach efforts. During her 17 years in South America, she ran a diocesan microcredit program that empowered women living in poverty in Peru. In Colombia, she worked with

homeless street children in a violent, drug-infested conflict zone. She witnessed unjustified and indiscriminate violence. Her stories are amazing. Today, she works with us to educate the growing number of American Spanish-speaking Catholics, and she also represents her religious congregation at the United Nations.

Why do you think people approve the death penalty?

Because they don't understand it. The death penalty that people believe that they are for is not the death penalty that we actually have. They are laboring under the misconception that the system is fair, efficient, seeks the truth above all, and is mistake-proof. And they think it brings justice to victims, that we somehow "owe it to the families" to kill their loved one's killer. They are horribly mistaken. I have met amazing victims' family members from groups like Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation and Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights who have shared over and over again that the death penalty system delays the day when their healing can begin, that killing another is not what they need or want for their family, and that "closure" is a myth.

And 142 people have been exonerated from death row, many after years behind bars for crimes they didn't commit. Can you imagine the horror of that? The system is racist and biased against the poor. There are no rich people on death row, and that's no accident. Many people think life imprisonment costs more. In fact, death penalty trials average $2 million, more than double the costs of life in prison, and almost all of that cost is in the initial stages. So speeding up appeals doesn't save money.

Don't some proponents cite the Bible for their support?

Some Christians say they are simply following the Old Testament's Exodus 21:23-25: an "eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth." They dismiss Matthew 5:38-42, where Jesus admonishes us not to engage in any retaliatory punishment at all but to "turn the other cheek" and to "do good to those who persecute you." Do you know that the Bible has 44 standards that regulate the use of the death penalty? The U.S. application fails to comply with any of them. Anyone who wants to learn more should read the new book *Where Justice and Mercy Meet: Catholic Opposition to the Death Penalty*. It comprehensively shares Catholic teaching and reasons for repeal using compelling stories. It's co-edited by CMN's Vicki Scheiber, too, and includes discussion questions helpful for book groups and students.

What anti-death-penalty successes have you witnessed in recent years?

More than six states in six years have repealed the death penalty. Catholic support for the use of the death penalty has dropped significantly to 48 percent. Younger Catholics (under 30) are even more vocal in their calls for repeal. Executions are down and death rows are shrinking. Fewer death sentences are meted out as people are less comfortable with our broken, biased system. Pope Benedict made appeals to stop the execution of Troy Davis and others and encouraged people to end the use of the death penalty. And Pope Francis in his first statement as pope made a call for mercy.

Have you ever known or interacted with a person on death row? If so, please tell us about that connection.

I have met and worked with many wonderful people in the movement such as exonerees, whose powerful stories help fuel my zeal to end the death penalty. I have also met courageous people like Terri Steinberg who share the truth about the death penalty's ripple effects on families. CMN's executive director, Karen Clifton, who has been working on this issue for years alongside her friend and our co-founder Sr. Helen Prejean has met family members of people on death row. Karen's son, Andrew, was a pen pal to James Aldridge. James was sentenced to death for participating in a convenience store robbery, during which his brother killed the store attendant. On Texas' death row, James was a mentor to many and used his talent as an artist to bring hope to others. His letters to Andrew spoke of the gift of freedom, advising him to making wise choices and value his

family. As a teenager, Andrew testified at a Texas state committee hearing about the wise mentor he found in James. James transformed his fellow death row inmates who tended to arrive angry and resentful into thoughtful and spirit-filled people. Texas killed James anyway. Andrew and Karen were present with the family on the day of his execution and experienced the surreal agony of anticipating a state-sanctioned murder.

Is your work a byproduct of your faith?

Absolutely. But even if I had no faith at all, I would still oppose the death penalty. It is a racist tool of justice that discriminates against the poor, keeps private prisons overflowing, breeds a cycle of violence and does nothing to restore communities or keep them safe. I believe in the Catholic vision of restorative justice: a victim-focused system that demands significant consequences and provides opportunities for healing for the victim and the victim's family and an opportunity for the offender to right the wrong they have done.

Do your family members share your concern?

I have two brothers. As conservatives, both were proponents of the death penalty. Our dinner table conversations are lively. Recent information from conservative groups they respect is opening their eyes to the government over-reach, the huge inefficiencies and the tremendous cost. My daughter, at 18, is embarrassed about the company the U.S. keeps: Our death penalty proponents are on the same page as major human rights violators like China, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran. She's horrified that our home state, North Carolina, just repealed the groundbreaking Racial Justice Act, which helped ensure racial bias doesn't put someone on death row. My husband is horrified that when North Carolina executes or pursues the death penalty, it does so in his (and all our) name.

Describe your current living situation (place and connections).

I am a seventh-generation D.C. native and moved to North Carolina five years ago. My mother and father met at George Washington University Law School in the 1950s. My mom was a groundbreaker, one of only three women in her graduating law school class. With a progressive mother and a conservative father, debates were lively and encouraged in my home. Principles were the bedrock. Moral ambiguity was frowned upon. It helped make me the person I am today. I've spent most of my career in public relations for nonprofit organizations in D.C. I always wanted to be a teacher, and after receiving my master's degree from Bellarmine University in 2003, I spent eight wonderful years teaching fifth- and sixth-graders in Catholic schools.

Do you have a favorite Scripture passage or Bible story?

John 8:1-11. In it, Jesus refused to stone to death the woman accused of adultery, reminding us to be cautious in judging others and to have hope in the possibility of reform and redemption.

How do you pray?

I learned to pray best from the sixth-graders I taught in Catholic school. They showed me how to speak to God as a friend and to listen with my all my heart for his reply. The students taught me much about restorative justice as well.

What about your faith is most meaningful to you?

Its moral clarity on the life issues, especially on the death penalty. As Catholics, we believe the sanction of death, when it is not necessary to protect society, always violates respect for human life and dignity. My faith teaches that the remedy to violence is mercy and love, not more violence.

Anything particularly encouraging or discouraging?

Discouraging? I'm not too happy with the leaders in my home state of North Carolina right now, who just repealed our groundbreaking Racial Justice Act. However, there are lots of encouraging points of light. The many leaders who are establishing innovative programs of restorative justice; the thousands of people who work to promote crime prevention and encourage reasonable gun control laws; and those who work eradicate poverty and drug abuse, which lead to so much violence. I'm always encouraged by the many religious orders and people like Fr. George Williams who minister in prisons.

What causes you joy?

Happy endings, like the stories of the more than 140 people exonerated from death row. Plus, six states in six years have passed repeal measures. More and more people are seeing the light and working to end the death penalty. Other people bring joy, like California's Fr. Greg Boyle of Homeboys Industries and Fr. David Kelley in Chicago and victims' family members like the Grosmaires of Florida, working to promote successful, effective and restorative justice programs.

How can people who share your interest get in touch with you?

Visit our website [3] or call us at 202-541-5290. You can also email me [4] and let me know how we can help you.

Is there something you wish I had asked?

I would just like to encourage people to contribute to our mission. At this time, all the funds we collect will be doubled through a generous matching grant provided by the Sisters of St. Joseph. Donate online [5] or send contributions by mail to 3025 4th St. NE, Washington, D.C. 20017.

[Mercy Sr. Camille D'Arienzo, broadcaster and author, narrates *Stories of Forgiveness*, a book about people whose experiences have caused them to consider the possibilities of extending or accepting forgiveness. The audiobook, renamed *Forgiveness: Stories of Redemption*, is available [6] from Now You Know Media.]

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