



Rector's Essay

What Does the Church Have to Say about. . .

By Jarrett Kerbel (10/11/26)

Last week the State of Tennessee failed to execute an inmate named Christa Pike. After two attempts at lethal injection Ms. Pike was still alive. An ambulance took her to the ICU.

What does the church teach about the death penalty? The longstanding position of the vast majority of Christian Ethicists is that the Death Penalty is immoral and cannot be reconciled with the teaching of Jesus Christ. After all, our faith tradition is built around the cross which is a reminder that our Lord was the victim of capital punishment.

The two most popular rationalizations of the death penalty are; 1. Deterrence, and 2. Justice as therapeutic retribution. Deterrence is the idea that the death penalty causes potential killers to think twice about their murderous plans. Justice as therapeutic retribution is the idea that the family of the victim is owed the life of the killer as just recompense and as a way to get 'closure' or 'satisfaction' for their sense of injustice and emotional pain.

Ethically, the problem with both rationalizations of capital punishment is that the human person on trial is reduced to a means, an instrument to achieve an end. One rock solid principle of Christian Ethics and most ethics in general - post Kant - is that the human person is always to be treated as an end in itself and not a means. Treating a person as an instrument of social policy or personal healing de-humanizes that person as an agent who bears a God-given dignity no matter what they have done. We cannot use a person for our ends. That is a form of enslavement.

What can we do then? The church teaches that we are allowed to incarcerate a person in a way that takes away the risk to the community and leaves open the possibility of

redemption. Not only is our faith constructed around a cross, it is also constructed around the resurrection. We are a people who know that we are redeemed sinners, raised by God into a new life that we did not earn or deserve.

Easier said than done, you say? Yes. The passions that come with the violent loss of loved ones are powerful and they call out for justice, for re-establishing safety and right relationship. The taming of passions is the work of the virtues and we know that virtue cannot be enforced by the state. However, drawing on the best of wisdom, human and divine, we can enshrine limits on our passions into law and find other means to support all involved in the process of reconciliation and redemption, which is the role of the church.

What would you say to the friend or relative of a murder victim if they challenged you face to face? First, I would show compassion for their horrible loss. If they were open to conversation I would question how they drew a line between revenge and justice? I would explore their belief that the death of another person is the solution for their sense of violation. Compassion with a person's pain and loss does not automatically entail agreement with how that person acts-out based on those feelings. At the end of the day, I am praying for all involved in the Tennessee case. Mostly, I am praying that the Tennessee authorities take a step back and take time to consider their responsibility and competence. If they are to claim the power to kill a person, they should at least do so with competence and a minimum of cruelty.