

Mother Teresa and the Death Penalty

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In the spring of 1988, while I was teaching in Scranton, Pennsylvania announced its first execution in decades. I was crushed by the news. People across the state, nearly all Christian, supported the scheduled murder. What can one do?, I wondered.

“What we need is someone like Mother Teresa to intervene for us,” I said to a friend, a Monsignor who worked at the diocesan office.

“Not many people know this,” he confided, “but I’ve led several annual retreats for her. I’m sure she would help.”

A light went on in my mind. I began to organize. I called the office of the Governor, a widely-respected Catholic, and asked him if he would receive an appeal from Mother Teresa on behalf of the condemned man. I also notified the press about arrangements for the call.

A day before I was going to contact Mother Teresa, a stay of execution was granted. We all rejoiced.

Over the next few years, I arranged Mother Teresa’s intervention on behalf of death row inmates on eight occasions. Each time, she eagerly offered her support and the prayers of her community in an effort to stop the killing and end the death penalty.

In early 1990, while studying at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, I read in horror of California’s impending execution of Robert Harris, who had brutally murdered two young brothers years earlier in San Diego. While no one supported his unimaginable violence, and while my friends and I wished only healing and peace for his victims’ family, we did not want the killing to continue.

Many friends organized demonstrations, vigils, letter-writing campaigns, lobbying efforts and prayer services in an effort to stop the murder of Robert Harris. What could I do? With other

Jesuits, I was deeply involved in ongoing protests against US military aid to El Salvador. We were still reeling from the massacre of six Jesuits and their co-workers a few months earlier. Yet a few miles away from the Berkeley hills on the San Francisco Bay, our government was planning with meticulous legal attention to murder someone at San Quentin.

I called the monsignor. “Do you think Mother Teresa would be willing to help us, and if so, how can I reach her?”

“Of course she would want to help,” he replied. “Here’s her private phone number. I will be praying for all of you.”

Nervous, anxious, filled with trepidation, I dialed the long number. Halfway around the world, thirteen and a half hours ahead of Berkeley, at 6:30 a.m., just after morning Mass, Mother Teresa picked up the phone in her office.

“Hello,” she said in her heavy, unmistakable, Albanian-Indian accent.

I introduced myself, told her the situation, and asked if she would be willing to help us.

“What exactly did Robert Harris do?” she asked. I told her, then proposed that she speak with the California governor George Deukmejian by phone in the next few days before the execution, and ask for clemency.

“Yes, I will,” she said, “and I will ask all the sisters at the Motherhouse here in Calcutta to pray for the governor.” She spoke of her visit a few years earlier to San Quentin’s death row. On the way out that day, she told a guard, “What you do to them, you do to God.”

We made the arrangements. I called Governor Deukmejian’s office and told them of Mother Teresa’s call. On Monday evening, March 26, 1990, Mother Teresa spoke briefly with the Governor. I called her back immediately to find out what happened, intending, as she agreed, to announce her message to the twenty reporters gathered at the front door of our Jesuit house.

“Did you speak with the Governor,” I asked.

“Yes. He started talking about how he had to do this, that this was the law.”

“What did you say?” I asked.

“I just said, ‘Do what Jesus would do.’”

I was stunned. No arguments. No statistics. No invocation of sin or immorality or injustice. No lecture. No angry denunciation. Just: Do what Jesus would do. She cut right to the heart of the matter.

“That’s all I said. He talked again about how it was in the state’s hand, so I repeated what I said, ‘Do what Jesus would do if he was in your position.’”

“We have to pray,” she continued. “We all have to pray so that he gets the grace and the courage to do what Jesus would do. Pray hard. Get as many people to pray for courage for him. Get everyone in the country to pray. And then, we have to respond to his decision with love and compassion. And keep praying for the family of the victims, too.”

She asked me to call her again with any news and promised to help anytime.

As I explained later that night, her message was simple and clear. Jesus was an opponent of the death penalty who was condemned to death, a prisoner on death row, legally executed by the authorities, a victim of the death penalty, and Mother Teresa was saying, “Do what he would do.” She did not need to add any explanation. It is all too clear what Jesus would do. He would not kill anyone. He would not kill, no matter what the crime, no matter what the cause. He would grant clemency, demand forgiveness and command nonviolent love.

The next morning, the *Los Angeles Times* carried a cartoon depicting Mother Teresa in one corner, speaking on the phone saying, “Do what Jesus would do if Jesus was in your position,” and the Governor in the other corner, on the phone asking, “What would Pilate do if Pilate was in my

position?”

Miraculously, a California judge intervened a few days later and a stay was issued.

Two years passed. A new governor, Pete Wilson, who campaigned on a pledge to resume executions, set another date. Most Californians supported his “tough stand against crime.” Despite eloquent opposition to the death penalty from the Pope, the Bishops and the Mother Teresa, over eighty percent of all Catholics supported executing people.

Again, Mother Teresa repeated her message. “Do what Jesus would do,” she said.

Alas, Wilson washed his hands of the case, and Harris was killed.

I called her with the news. After expressing her grief, she said, “God sees only love. God only sees the love that we put into what we do.” She thanked all those who tried to save his life.

A year later, I received an urgent call that my friend Billy Neal Moore, a death row inmate in Georgia whom I had visited and corresponded with for years, was to be executed in a few days. Billy had been on death row longer than anyone else up to that time. He and a friend got drunk one night, robbed a liquor store and killed its elderly owner. The next morning, he wept and begged forgiveness of his victim’s family. He spent his years on death row praying, studying the scriptures, and counseling other inmates in Jesus’ way of nonviolence.

I flew to Georgia to be with Billy. We organized prayer services, press conferences, demonstrations and vigils. Mother Teresa spoke on the phone to the chairperson of the Georgia Board of Pardon and Paroles which has the power to grant clemency before an execution. Mother Teresa promised that her community would keep a running prayer vigil for clemency. Meanwhile, Billy sent a message from prison, urging us to be sure that we grant clemency in our hearts to all those who have personally hurt us. Otherwise, he said, we cannot expect the God of clemency to take us seriously and answer our prayer.

Several hours before the scheduled execution, the victim's family members appeared before the Board and pleaded for Billy's life, saying that killing Billy would not bring their relative back, nor would it end the killing or ease their pain. Forgiveness and clemency were the only way to healing.

In an historic, miraculous decision, clemency was granted. Several months later, Billy was quietly released from prison. Today, he ministers to prisoners and teaches Jesus' way of love.

Not long afterwards, I was ordained and participated in a Plowshares anti-nuclear demonstration. My friends and I hammered briefly on an F15e nuclear capable jet, the kind used to drop bombs on Iraq. It was another way of trying to stop the killing, this time, the murder of our nation's enemies. I spent eight months in North Carolina jails. I received supportive letters from many friends and relatives, but it was especially moving to receive words of encouragement from Billy and Mother Teresa. "Be glad that you are to proclaim the love of Jesus even to the poor in prison," she wrote. "Give Jesus your pain and limitation and trust in Him. In your weakness His power will be a protection and a strength."

In 1995, while in Rome, I met Mother Teresa at her Order's headquarters. She was badly stooped over by then. When I was introduced, she reached up and put her hands firmly on my cheeks and held them there for about fifteen seconds, while she smiled and stared into my eyes. Then, she folded her arms, pretending to be stern with me, as if to reprimand me for doubting her, and asked with a suppressed chuckle, "What did I say they should do?"

"You said they should do what Jesus would do," I answered.

"And what did they do for your friend?"

"They did what Jesus would do; they granted him clemency."

"Thank God!" she said with an enormous smile. She was filled with joy at the thought of

clemency. She asked about Billy and my work, and promised that her sisters would pray for me for the rest of my life.

That day in Rome, I felt tremendous love pouring out from her. If love is all God sees, as Mother Teresa told me on the phone and later wrote me, then I'm sure that God saw her. Her entire spirit radiated unconditional love.

Though she was famous for her compassion for the poor and her advocacy for the unborn, she was equally opposed to the death penalty and to war. How could she do otherwise, since she sought so passionately to practice the love of Jesus?

When I think of her now, I remember her voice, and her simple, stunning wisdom. "Do what Jesus would do." With these five words, Mother Teresa offers us a mantra, a practical solution, a way out of the world's violence. She calls each of us--from governors and presidents to parents and churchgoers--to live out the love of God just as Jesus did. That means, not only showing compassion to the poor and needy, but speaking out against executions, bombing raids, and nuclear threats. She wants us not only to read about Jesus, to think about Jesus, but to do the things that Jesus did.

Simple advice, yes, but rarely put so bluntly in the face of such a politically charged issue. The logic of her wisdom, though politically incorrect, is theologically, biblically and spiritually sound. As we do what we can to abolish the death penalty and promote peace; as we try in our own way to do what Jesus would do if he were in our shoes; as we too radiate that same unconditional, compassionate love; God will see each one of us, just as God sees Mother Teresa, and will grant the same verdict: clemency for all.

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