



Discussion on Torture is Often Torturous

“By now, you’ve probably read about it: a Middle East religious and political “dissident” taken captive by a Western government, interrogated, ridiculed, made to endure denigrating postures, beaten and eventually killed. His name? Jesus Christ. Two thousand years later, Christ remains with us, and so does torture.” “Meditating on the sufferings of Christ,” says Orlando Bishop Thomas Wenski “can help us bring an end to torture. His agony in the garden before his arrest, his painful scourging, the mocking crowning with thorns, his carrying of the cross and his crucifixion — we do well to recall how this was visited upon Jesus with state sanction,” said Bishop Wenski, “if only to understand why the Church in her teachings condemns torture” (from Why the Church Condemns Torture, Bishops Publish Study Guide On Issue That Divides U.S. by Anthony Flott). On June 23, 2008, Bishop Wenski and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops took a significant step toward conveying those teachings, issuing, “Torture is a Moral Issue: A Catholic Study Guide.” (nrcat.org)

Is water-boarding torture or simply an enhanced interrogation technique? People from all walks of life continue to dissect meanings, nuances, and definitions. For me, water-boarding is an act of violence, with questionable purpose and questionable results. The end does not justify the means is a challenging, yet, operative moral principle.

There may be a more basic way to frame our conversation. Can the following lead to a more Faith-based and less politics-based discussion? All human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. We are called to recognize the dignity of God in all people, from conception to natural death. Any act of violence against any of God’s children is morally unacceptable. (We’ll get to the issue of self-preservation and self-defense soon.) The legal choice to abort an unborn child, even though that decision may be interwoven with fear, desperation, or uncertainty, is an act of violence against a child of God. Capital punishment, often supported through a veil of fear, revenge, and, quite possibly a tinge of racism, is an act of violence against a child of God. War is an act of violence against God’s children. How many of us were made aware of Pope John Paul II’s moral vision, in an explicit and consistent way, when he spoke out against a "preemptive" or "preventive" strike of Iraq, declaring that the just war theory could not justify such a war?

All the life issues, including stem-cell research (which can be likened to a type of embryonic water-boarding – extracting potentially helpful information through immoral means), euthanasia, abuse of the air we breathe and the water we drink, unjust working conditions and wages, poverty, homelessness, hunger – all are acts of violence against God’s children and are morally unacceptable – unless, like those who support torture, you believe that the end justifies the means.

Here, I would like to offer a point for discussion, relative to the issues of self-preservation and self-defense. I often wonder why Jesus did not do more to defend Himself when faced with Pilate’s enhanced interrogation techniques. Maybe Jesus did not consider self-preservation a Kingdom of God ideal. Apparently, the martyred Apostles did not, either. Do we? We seem to justify certain decisions on the basis of self or national preservation. Maybe the crucifixion is Jesus’ way of saying that He, (and, hopefully, His followers), would rather die, obedient to God’s radical way of love, than to strike back those who threatened or harmed Him. Jesus did say, “fear is useless; what is needed is trust.” Maybe non-violent resistance to injury is the most effective way to speak truth to power. Easter is God’s way of proclaiming that Jesus’ non-violent response was the true and lasting path to reconciliation, renewal, and life.

So, here we are, living in a world of uncertainty, in dire need of prayerful dialogue. We are inundated with those who convince us to create policy and evaluate decisions, through our fears. We also know that when you raise the level of fear, you reduce the level of reason, and compromise moral conduct. How many of us now find “the end justifies the means” as morally acceptable in certain circumstances. Some journalists take a pledge to practice, “without fear or favor.” We, as followers of Christ, should pledge to live our lives without fear or favor. Of course, we did just that at Baptism, when we became citizens of the Kingdom of God – the Cross of universal reconciliation and love over-shadowing the flags of our nations, and the armor of self-preservation. Larry DiPaul, Director of the Office of Social Justice Ministry, Diocese of Camden, NJ