

The Illinois Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty

2007 Cunningham-Carey Award Presentation

Chicago, Illinois - November 1, 2007

The Wine Cellar at Maggiano's

offered by:

His Grace, Bishop Demetrios of Mokissos

Chancellor, Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Chicago

Dear brother clergy, friends, colleagues, and fellow advocates for the abolition of the death penalty: The Cunningham-Carey Award is a significant honor presented to those who have struggled in a fight that I prayed would be over--making this award obsolete. Apparently, I was selected to be its sixth recipient due to an "unyielding and powerful voice for human dignity and the abolition of the death penalty."

Indeed, when I began ministering to Andrew Korkoraleis on death row, I never imagined it would lead to any award. At the time, I prayed fervently for the commutation of Andrew's sentence. This did not happen, and I shared in that failure with numerous other advocates for the abolition of the death penalty. Later, I met with the Governor of this state. At that time, I was made aware that my voice--together with the assembled religious leaders present--may have been "unyielding," but was no more powerful than the Governor's, who made it clear in words and actions that--at that time, anyway--he would not change his position. So in light of the ongoing abuses of our fellow human beings throughout our land and, indeed, throughout the world, I must be unyielding, but my voice does not seem all that powerful. One human voice, in and of itself, is never really powerful. It is easily drowned in a cacophony of sounds in our society demanding attention. A powerful voice can only be such if it not only passes through ears, but enters into hearts eliciting a response: a chorus of voices in harmony repeating the same message.

The beauty of our Coalition is the fact that on this particular issue, so many persons from diverse backgrounds come together to converse--literally, to turn together--in common cause. This is not to say that in our coalition we have always agreed on strategy or tactics. As a former President of this organization, I can attest to the difficulty in trying to harness the different preferences, skills, motives, and even politics of our constituents. Still, a harmony of notes requires diversity; diversity is not necessarily cacophonous.

A harmonious voice from the Illinois Coalition has the potential to raise up a beautiful hymn, a new song. The success of our coalition will come when that voice descends past the ears of the citizens of our world and descends into their hearts, for only then can the words, the reasons, the pleas, the rational arguments be truly evaluated. Only then can we begin to expect others to turn together, seeking common ground and goals. As a coalition, we have been speaking to our fellow citizens, our politicians and authorities for over thirty years. The response has not been overwhelming, and a majority do not yet join our song. Yet we have made a difference, we have changed hearts and minds, and slowly we are gaining ground. It is my prayer that this will continue, with renewed vigor and sense of purpose.

There are, as I see it, two difficulties we face in our common struggle. The first is complacency. The moratorium in Illinois is a temporary measure, and for some this is enough. Many in our state view it as an opportunity to repair the system, to make it more just. The effort to make it "more just" reveals an attitude that thinks we can quantify justice. How much justice is enough? What would an acceptable rate of failure be? Do we simply need a higher objective standard to kill someone? Can we execute if there is absolute certainty as to guilt?

The second difficulty is the tendency for our conversation to begin and end with this single subject as a matter of justice . And I feel it crucially important that we fight for something other than "justice": the abolition of the death penalty should be a fight for righteousness.

While I am reticent about accepting an award for a task as yet undone, I do believe it is of special significance that I stand here, an Orthodox Christian bishop. In my faith tradition, we make a distinction between an individual and a person. An individual is something separate and alone, quantified, objectified, one "*something*" among many. The philosophical notion of personhood, so important to the existentialists, is actually a Christian conception. The Greek word for person, *prosopon* , from *pros tin opsin* , literally "before the eyes," means a person cannot be objectified, seen as one "something" among many, a faceless being in a group we call society. It is not just a matter of semantics: A person cannot be isolated from those he or she relates to and with. I am who I am because of the influence of others, starting with parents and all those who touch my life. Indeed, *all* those are also affected by *all* their relationships and, in this way, we see the whole human race is fundamentally connected *personally* . If I speak for the dignity of the human, it is only for the person, because not one human being truly stands alone. And I therefore do not speak on my own accord. I stand as a member of the Body of Christ, a communion of persons who share one mind and one voice in our conversation with the world.

Our opposition to the death penalty is not due to some sense of justice or injustice. It has little to do with justice, with "law" or "principle" or "code" or "equality." My opposition to the death penalty is because it is unrighteous. Justice and righteousness are not necessarily the same.

If Lady Justice is blind (the ideal of our nation's system of justice), righteousness sees clearly. Justice, because it is ideally blind, necessarily deals with the collective of individuals, what we call society, and sets objective standards. It cannot see someone "eye to eye," personally. It need not examine the hearts of human beings--what applies to one applies to all. I am not indicting our constitution and system of government. I simply mean to point out that there is a difference, from my perspective between justice--that which is according to the law and objective--and that which is right, regardless as to what the laws of men may be. Objective laws determine justice (this is what the root of the word means) but a higher, transcendent personal power determines righteousness. Righteousness can never objectify the human person.

Justice demands balance, justice demands compensation, justice demands punishment when laws are broken. Arguing about the death penalty from the perspective of justice requires a debate about the law: whether the law benefits our society from different vantage points such as deterrence, economics, constitutional rights, even international politics, and so forth. Simply as a matter of objective logic, one may even agree in theory that an ultimate crime demands an ultimate punishment: this is the concern of justice. It is hard to argue against such logic. The fight for abolition in many ways requires a fight against the cold, calculating, objective logic of the world. It cannot easily win on those grounds.

My faith tradition never really argues about the law: render to Caesar what is Caesar's. We follow a different rationale. Jesus of Nazareth did not excuse crime, violations of the law, or sins against his society. Nor did he refrain, by the way, from judgment. But Jesus Christ transcends justice in the sense of law: and this transcendence is due to love. Love, biblically, is not an emotional feeling, but a way of existing: personal, not individualistic; affirming the worth and dignity of every human being no matter *what* they are, be they a murderer, adulterer, thief and so forth. *What* they were labeled due to actions or qualities could not possibly describe and explain them fully. Only love can encompass *all of who* they are. Our problem is that blind justice is only concerned with *what* we do, not *who* we are.

For Jesus, even the very least, the very lowest, the very worst, were a part of his life; members of a body with whom he shared a relationship and therefore responsible for who he was himself. Orthodox Christians cannot hold blind justice as an ideal, when our Lord acted beyond justice, by *assuming* the punishment of death voluntarily when He was, in fact, the *only* perfectly innocent *person* . Thankfully, God does not mete out blind justice: who could stand if our sins are recounted? And if God does not execute, who are we to impose it?

This does not mean that we can ignore matters of justice, equitable treatment under the law, economic impacts of public policy and so forth. It does mean, however, that we must understand human dignity to be set apart--the meaning of sanctity--to be set apart from all other arguments and notions about an objective society and its justice. We cannot prioritize the collective over the person: they must be of concern together.

Regrettably, any fight for justice that calculates the objective benefits for an impersonal concept such as "society" will be doomed to fail. Humanity, which creates society and law and a conception of justice, also resists objectification, a profound paradox of our world. Only a fight for righteousness--for the dignity and worth of human persons on the basis of *who* they are--can hope to inspire the hearts of our neighbors. It is the more difficult fight, and it requires a belief in a moral absolute, it requires faith and trust in the inherent dignity of humanity, and above all a faith in a personal power greater than ourselves. But if we continually *strive* for righteousness, we may achieve what is just.

On behalf, then, of all who stand with me in opposition to the death penalty and in affirmation of human dignity, I accept this award with thanksgiving to God who grants us our personhood, the transcendence of the self. I share it with my brother clergy, colleagues, friends, and coalition partners without whom I would simply be a voice in the wilderness, full of fury signifying nothing, and pray that together our conversation will allow us to turn hearts and minds together in common cause to protect all life and bring a cessation to the unjust, immoral and impersonal penalty of death.