Facing Death with Life in the Balance: Challenges and Hope for an Abolishment of the Death Penalty

by Alison McCrary, C.S.J.

Death and grieving have become commonplace in recent years in my life. As a newer and younger woman religious, the age demographics in my community have placed me in the chapel at an unusual number of funerals for a thirty-two-year old. As part of the age minority where “more than two-thirds of men and women vowed religious in the United States today are older than sixty five” with only nine percent of today’s sisters under the age of sixty,¹ in a larger congregation, the understanding and acceptance of diminishment and dying have become part of my formation. Even with this new familiarity of the death and grieving process, nothing could prepare me for the death of a man named Chris in Louisiana.

I met Chris nine years ago. He is seventy years old, Catholic, and Apache Native-American. Chris’ nickname is “Shorty.” He stands barely five foot tall. In 2005, I was hired to be a paralegal and investigator on capital cases in Louisiana and was assigned to Chris’ legal team. After working on his case and then entering law school, Chris and I continued our communication through letter writing.

For nine years, we corresponded monthly. In December of 2012, Chris wrote and asked me to serve as his spiritual advisor. A spiritual advisor meets regularly with an inmate, develops a relationship, prepares the person spiritually, psychologically, and emotionally for the execution, and assists with funeral preparations. One of my sisters accompanied Chris for twenty years until her passing in December of 2012. Within days of her death, the State set an execution date of February 13, 2013, ironically the same day as Ash Wednesday that year. The government would put Chris to death by lethal injection and bury him in one of the cemeteries at the notorious Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola, Louisiana.

At the time of Chris’ request, I was a first-year novice in the Congregation of St. Joseph living in our novitiate house in Chicago, so the timing of Chris’ request from down south was not exactly convenient. I was also unsure of my emotional ability to be present in an execution room during his lethal injection and ultimate death. Though


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afraid, a deep love within me trumped my fear and propelled me to say yes; after all, it is our vows in religious life that free us for such radical availability to love. My congregation granted my request, and the penitentiary accepted my application to serve as Chris’ spiritual advisor.

Chris and I exchanged letters and spoke on the phone frequently. Advocacy campaigns were organized requesting a commutation from a sentence of death to a sentence of life without parole. Hundreds of people wrote to the district attorney, pardon board, and governor. We argued that Chris’ death sentence should be commutated for a variety of reasons: his older age, poor health, and mental illness; his repentance and rehabilitation; the unjust punishment for the crime; and constitutional legal errors. Unfortunately, our efforts to obtain clemency for Chris failed. The district attorney, pardon board, and governor refused to grant a commutation of his sentence.

Ten days before Chris’ execution date, two sisters and I drove to Louisiana. While I met and prayed with Chris for eight hours each day, my religious sisters prayed with me and offered their support. Together, Chris and I were preparing for an unnatural death by a non-forgiving government, a government unable to see the rehabilitated and repentant Chris I had come to know and love. While Chris had mystical-like wisdom to share with me, all I had to share was my presence, prayer, and a listening ear. In the execution room, all I could be was a face of God’s love for him.

On the day before Chris’ scheduled death, the government delayed the execution because the state illegally obtained the lethal drugs to be used. Since that date, Chris received two other execution dates. Each time we prepared and then received a last minute stay of Execution. The journey has been an emotional rollercoaster.

Currently, Chris’ life hangs in a balance. I continue to accompany Chris as his legal team challenges the constitutionality of the lethal injection process. My original and ongoing “yes” to this ministry is grounded in a deep belief that our God is a God of love, compassion, mercy, and forgiveness. Even though I abhor violence and understand the need for punishment of crimes and rehabilitation, our faith calls us to follow in the salvific love of Jesus the Christ.

We are called by the foundational theme of Catholic social teaching to affirm that sacred human dignity does not discriminate between those who are innocent and those who are guilty. Instead, it is a gift that is freely and undeservedly betowed on us by our Creator and not to be taken away by humanity. In his pastoral letter, Evangelium Vitae (The Gospel of Life), Saint John Paul II writes, “whoever attacks human life, in some way attacks God himself

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2 Less than 0.5% of the 14,842 persons executed in the United States since 1776 belong to Chris’ age bracket or older. Tracy L. Snell, U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics, “Capital Punishment, 2012 - Statistical Tables,” May 15, 2014.

3 Chris has been diagnosed with moderate brain damage affecting his ability to control behavior, emotions, and decision-making. Individuals with childhood trauma who suffer from brain damage and mental illness are grossly over-represented on Louisiana’s death row. (See Alex Mikulich and Sophie Cull, “Diminishing All of Us: A Study of the Death Penalty in Louisiana,” 2012 at http://catholicsmobilizing.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Death-Penalty-in-Louisiana_Full.pdf).

4 Chris was indicted by a grand jury system contaminated by a longstanding pattern of racial discrimination and was unable to obtain relief in the court system because his trial lawyer failed to complete the pre-trial paperwork necessary to challenge the results of such discriminatory practices. See McCleskey v. Kemp, 48 U.S. 279, 327 (1989), Brennan, J. dissenting.

5 Chris was scheduled to be executed on November 5, 2013 and February 5, 2014.


7 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Life and Dignity of the Human Person,” http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/life-and-dignity-of-the-human-person.cfm. The Catechism of the Catholic Church also calls us to acknowledge both the rights that states possess in protecting is citizenry, as well as the appropriateness of the punishment is uses to do so. (CCC 2267).

8 Saint John Paul II called our attention to how God showed mercy even when punishing Cain who murdered his brother Abel (Gen 4:15). God gave Cain a distinctive sign even against those who wished to avenge Abel's death. The Pope stresses that “not even a murderer loses his personal dignity, as God himself pledges to guarantee this.” (Evangelium Vitae, no. 9).
By utilization of the death penalty as punishment, we, as a society, violate our most cherished value—the sacred dignity of human life.

This year, a series of botched executions have made even more transparent the stripping of human dignity and sacred life as it triggered disturbing concerns about the supposedly quick, painless, and humane method of lethal injection. Many states, like Louisiana, have concealed their protocols and drug sources from the public to prevent attorneys from challenging them as “cruel and unusual punishment.” The troublesome procedure of government executions has been exposed. The current challenges in state and federal courts around the constitutionality of lethal injection give us hope for reform and abolishment of the death penalty. May this illumination lead us to see that God’s mercy calls us to find a better way that respects the sacred life and dignity of all.

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11 First U.S. Congress. “Eighth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.” “Excessive bail shall not be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted.”