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The Scandal of Our Tradition

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The Scandal of Our Tradition

Katherine Schmidt

I began college with visions of protests dancing in my head. Cautionary tales from high school teachers about the evils of liberal higher education—tales that, incidentally, only whetted my growing appetite to challenge unjust systems—created my image of college as a place of activism and revolution. But instead, I found complacent teenagers at a small, liberal arts Catholic college in the mountains, seemingly unaware of American wars being fought on dubious premises and annoyed by talk of current events. Although some students shared my concern for the injustices happening in the off-campus world, I struggled to find a place for my youthful activist passion within the community of affluent, entitled kids I had unwittingly joined.

I found my solace in theology and chose it as my major after studying Catholic social teaching. My desire for social action, however unfortunately

imbued with romantic scenes of Vietnam-era protests, only grew as I acquired theological grounding in the Church's social encyclicals. I became energized by the consistent ethic of life, the idea that being "pro-life" encompassed much more than just opposing abortion. Social teaching that addressed the question of justice for all people became the center of my personal and academic life. One issue that seemed particularly under-examined was the death penalty. Though I had attended a few execution vigils in high school, my first opportunity for real activism arrived when a philosophy professor held a meeting for students interested in abolishing the death penalty in Maryland and beyond. Thus began my time as a death penalty abolitionist.

Our first campus meeting of the Campaign to End the Death Penalty (CEDP) started strong, attracting about twenty students, a respectable number for a college of less than two thousand. In the first few months, we hosted several speakers and events that piqued the interest of the student body. Faculty encouraged their students to attend our events, and some even spoke from their professional perspectives about the issue.

One of our earliest events featured two men who had been exonerated from death row. The room was jam-packed with students, held unusually rapt by the tragic stories of the men before them. Another event, a panel of experts offering perspectives on the death penalty, drew a standing-room-only crowd, which made me giddy with a feeling of palpable, forward-moving energy. In those early days, we felt we were stirring the campus as a whole, beyond our personal acquaintances, to a greater awareness of the injustice of capital punishment. We hoped this awareness would lead to great results in the form of activism and change, especially to foster public voting will to end the death penalty in Maryland.

The following year, I agreed to be vice president of CEDP, with my dear friend Sarah as president. We quickly realized that our chapter was not as strong as it had been. We gained a few new members but remained a smaller version of our earlier self. What I remember most clearly from that year was our extensive effort at "tabling." On our small campus, almost every student—and most faculty—ate lunch and dinner in the same place. Equipped with extensive research on the social, racial, moral, and financial aspects of the death penalty, our organization began an information campaign during

meals. Specifically, we wanted to combat the common arguments in favor of capital punishment. For example, for lunch and dinner one day, we handed out big, brightly colored dollar bills with the governor's face on them. Where the denomination would be, we had placed "\$2 million"—the amount that the state of Maryland actually spends on court costs per case to put a person to death. We wanted to counter the myth that it costs less to put a person to death than to keep someone in prison for life.

It was through my experience "tabling" that I first realized the challenge of abolition work. One particularly slow night in the cafeteria, I went from table to table with my information sheets. On many campuses, this might be seen as immensely awkward or rude, but I determined that our school was just small enough that it might work—although I didn't know exactly what success would look like.

"Hi, guys. We're distributing some information about the death penalty," I began.

Silence. Stunned faces.

"I was wondering what you all thought about the issue, or if I could answer any questions..." I trailed off, hoping someone would chime in.

"No questions," a male student said. "If you kill someone, you need to be killed."

His friends nodded.

I tried my best to respond. "Well, what about forgiveness? We're at a Catholic school, and a cornerstone of the faith is forgiveness."

"All right, whatever."

I had prepared myself for awkward conversations, but I had not expected utter disengagement. Time and again, mention of the Catholic Church brought the conversation to a screeching halt. In fairness, however, most of my talking points did. People did not want to look past their knee-jerk, emotional reactions and actually talk about the death penalty. At least one person at any given table would be looking at her food, her lap, the floor—anything that could distract her from the conversation. I had expected long discussions about the morality of the death penalty. The energy of the year

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before had belied a real and serious fact: getting people, especially young people, to engage in the capital punishment discussion was the first and most difficult task at hand.

Although encountering so much complacency discouraged me, it also better prepared me for the work. And other times, I encountered folks who needed no prompting to engage the topic of capital punishment. One summer afternoon, my sister and I were leaving the beach when a middle-aged man approached us.

“You don’t actually believe that, do you?” he said, gesturing toward the bumper sticker on my car.

In yellow letters on a black background, it read: THE DEATH PENALTY IS A HATE CRIME.

“Well,” I started, “yes, sir. Yes, I do.”

He wasted no time launching into one of the most common arguments: “Would you feel that way if your mother was murdered?”

“I can’t say how I’d feel,” I admitted, “but my faith compels me to love all people. I believe that people are more than their greatest sins, even if those sins were committed against my family.”

“Well, I think you’ll change your mind when you’re older,” he said.

“I hope not, because that would mean I had lost my faith in Christ,” I answered.

His face changed from a scowl to a smirk. “Okay, what denomination are you?”

Since we were in southern Virginia, I quickly assumed that he was probably Southern Baptist and would dismiss my views and chalk them up to differences among traditions when he found out I was Catholic.

“Well, sir,” I said, and then paused. “I’m Catholic.”

His face fell immediately, and his voice grew quiet when he answered, “So am I.”

My heart raced as I reminded him of our Church’s teaching on the death penalty. He looked down at his feet. He explained that he had always struggled with the Church’s position on capital punishment because he didn’t know how he could forgive someone if a member of his family had been murdered.

While this encounter reminded me of the difficulty of turning even

those within my own Church against capital punishment, I left hopeful. I knew that I had at least made one more person, one more Christian, think about the implications of his faith regarding the fact that our government kills other human beings and calls it justice.

Once again, I found myself in the campus cafeteria promoting a panel of murder victims' families. I stood up to greet a mass of men leaving the cafeteria, all dressed in black and chatting quietly to each other. They were members of the diocesan seminary attached to my college. The seminarians were mostly detached from the activities of the college, with the exception of meals and philosophy classes. As a philosophy minor, I had come to know some of the "men in black."

The stream of seminarians ignored my advertising of the evening's event. I stopped one of my classmates near the end of the pack, a first-year seminarian.

"Hey, you guys should come tonight."

"Oh, I think we're pretty busy tonight," he replied.

I decided to just ask.

"Listen, why is it that you guys don't seem to support our work?" Hoping to find some common ground, I offered, "I mean, John Paul II has been pretty clear about the death penalty."

"Yeah, definitely," he agreed. "I just think that most of us feel like abortion is the more pressing issue. Because, you know, there are millions of babies being killed."

In that moment, I clearly felt the optimism drain from my heart. I suppose I always knew that some people stratified life issues in their minds, but never had it been made so painfully obvious. This particular argument struck me as oddly utilitarian, as if the number of abortions somehow trumped the "few" lives of people on death row. Shrouded in the language of strategy or prudence, making distinctions about the value of human life seemed to run contrary to the very tradition of protecting all human life that the Church purports to espouse. I came to realize that the issue of capital punishment brings into sharp relief the struggle at the heart of what it means to be a follower of Christ—namely, the struggle to love those whom it is not easy to love.

That night, I attended the panel of murder victims' family members.

Before it began, I looked around the auditorium with the seminarian's words ringing in my ears. A woman whose seven-year-old daughter had been murdered snapped me out of my frustration and reoriented my focus to the issue at hand.

"I came to a place," she said, "where I realized that God loved [the murderer] as much as he loved my little girl."

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Engaging with the issue of capital punishment in any kind of concerted way means opening oneself to some of the greatest tragedies of life. I realized that night that I also had the privilege of encountering the fullness of hope and reconciliation through this work, as I witnessed the way this mother embodied the forgiveness of Christ.

One of the last formal events about the death penalty I attended was a conference honoring lawyers, activists, doctors, and clergy for their activism to end capital punishment. My first inclination was to feel small—my letters to death row inmates, campus programming, and efforts to raise awareness felt insignificant compared to these honorees. But that night, I came to believe something that sticks with me to this day. I began to think about the Passion of Jesus. Simon helped carry the very cross of Christ, bearing in his body some of Jesus' physical strife. Veronica, on the other hand, simply wiped Jesus' face, doing what she could to ease his pain.

In any justice movement, there are Simons and there are Veronicas. This past Christmas, I stumbled upon a box of letters from death row inmates. The letters were responses to Christmas cards I had sent out during my senior year of college, a task I had undertaken alone when nearly all of our members stopped showing up to meetings. I read through the letters again and decided to respond. Writing to inmates is a small thing, a mere moment of comfort in a long process of suffering. But if I learned anything as an advocate against capital punishment, it is that we press on. As long as the injustice of the death penalty persists, so too must we persist, often in ways that seem small, insignificant, and consistently futile. Although we will

undoubtedly be frustrated by the complacency, opposition, or outright apathy we find in our own Church, we must also remember the scandal of our tradition: We follow a God who was once a victim of capital punishment. Inspired and sustained by the self-giving love of the Cross, in ways small and large, we respond to the call for justice.