

Introduction: A Lenten Fast from Violence



During Lent, we are invited to fast from the violence that so pervades our culture --as well as the daily violence in our own lives, manifested in thought, attitude, and spirit.

As we hear the news each day, look in many of our neighborhoods, or consider the entertainment in much of the modern Western Culture, it is clear that we are immersed in a sea of violence. Violence is in our language and has seeped into much of our culture. Pope John Paul II often referred to a “culture of death”; a key element of this “culture” is violence.

How are we to name and then exorcise this violence from our lives? There are no easy steps; however, it does take a journey and process of changing the way we live. Lent provides us a time to examine our lives, and through prayer, fasting and reflection, change directions.

In this spirit, you are invited you to enter this Lent 2008 with the purpose of “fasting from violence.” The reflections offered here will guide you in looking critically at the violence in our world and lives. Prayer and reflection questions will help you to consider ways to change direction. In Mt. 17:21, Jesus says that some evil spirits are so strong, “[t]his kind can only be driven out by prayer and fasting.” Violence is such a prevalent part of our culture that resisting it requires deep prayer and fasting.

These reflections and prayers are designed for you— as an individual, with your family, and/or as a small group. May your weeks of Lent be a powerful time of reflection, prayer, and fasting from violence.

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Ash Wednesday: Exploring the Meaning of Violence

In the first few days of Lent, as you begin this journey, we encourage you to reflect on various definitions and ways of speaking of and naming violence.

Below are four statements on the meaning of violence.¹

The organization *Pace e Bene* defines violence in this way:

Violence is any physical, emotional, verbal, institutional, structural, or spiritual behavior, attitude, policy, or condition that diminishes, dominates, or destroys ourselves or others.

Violence crosses boundaries without permission, disrupts authentic relationships, and separates us from other beings.

Violence is often motivated by fear, unrestrained anger, or greed to increase domination or power over others. It can also be motivated by a desire for justice in the face of injustice: a longing to put things right, to overcome an imbalance of power, to end victimization or oppression.

Often, those who perpetrate violence do so with the conviction that they are overcoming a prior violence or injustice. Violence often provokes new violence. This spiral of retaliatory violence is often propelled by social or personal scripts that are enacted in situations of conflict.



Violence separates us from other beings.

Miki Kashtan describes another perspective on violence:

Violence comes out of fear or desperation when people do not see any other options for meeting their needs. Under such circumstances, the likelihood increases that people will act in ways that compromise the emotional, physical, social, or spiritual safety of others. Violence involves losing one's awareness of other people's humanity, and this leads people to act in ways that they would otherwise not choose.

John Dear, S.J., provides yet another definition of violence:

Violence is best defined as that act of forgetting or ignoring who we are: brothers and sisters of one another... Violence is any behavior that dehumanizes us, from thoughts of self-hatred to intentional harm or physical injury done to another. Our apathy and indifference in the face of relievable suffering and our willingness to defend our possessions and self-interests have harmful effects on others and are a participation in violence. The lack of love and the anxiety in our hearts, the unwillingness to suffer with others and to forgive others, and the insecurity, the fears and untruth in which we frame our lives are all participations in violence because their consequences are harmful to others.

And finally, Johan Galtung writes:

There are three types of violence: direct violence, structural violence, and cultural violence.

¹ All statements are taken from *Engage: Exploring Nonviolent Living* (Pace e Bene Press: Oakland, 2005) p. 34.

Direct violence refers to physical acts of violence.

Structural violence is the violence built into the very social, political, and economic systems that govern societies, states and the world. It is the different allocations of goods, resources, opportunities, between different groups, classes, genders, nationalities, etc. Its relationship to direct violence is similar to that of the bottom nine-tenths of an iceberg, hidden from view.

Cultural violence includes those aspects of a culture that legitimize violence and make violence seem like an acceptable means of responding to conflict. It is a way a community or individuals view themselves in relation to themselves, to "others," and the world. It often supports a sense of superiority over, and dehumanization of, other cultures.

The four definitions call to mind different important characteristics of the many forms of violence: it divides instead of unites; it is often born from fear; it dehumanizes others; and it provokes new violence. As you enter into Lent 2008, how would you define violence? And more importantly, can you identify its presence in your own life?

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Questions

1. What similarities and differences did you see between the four "definition statements" about violence?
2. Reflecting on these definitions, how do you experience violence in your life, in your family, in your community, and in our nation and world?

Prayer Activity

1. List on paper the various forms of violence which you experience and/or in which you participate.
2. Choose one or two of these and write them on a small piece of paper or index card.
3. Place them in a location where you will see them regularly (e.g., bathroom mirror, dresser, T.V. remote...).
4. Each time you pass and see these reminders of violence, pray for the insight, direction and strength to exorcise them from your life.



1st Week of Lent: The Value of All Life

In this first week of Lent, we invite you to explore how violence attacks the very value of all life. If we are to “fast from violence,” we must fill the hole that the removal of violence leaves with a renewed hope and appreciation for all of life.

This type of approach to life invites us to reconsider the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin’s call to a “seamless garment of life”:

The logic of a consistent ethic is to press the moral meaning of both issues (abortion and war). The consequences of a consistent ethic is to bring under review the positions of every group in the Church which sees the moral meaning in one place *but not the other*: it challenges pro-life groups, and it challenges justice and peace groups. The meaning of a consistent ethic is to say in the Catholic community that our moral tradition calls us beyond the split in the wider society between moral witness to life before and after birth.¹

The “consistent ethic of life” is the antithesis of our current culture of violence. It declares that we as people of faith cannot choose our “issues” in such a way that we discount others. It also does not allow us to fall into believing in easy solutions to the complexities of our modern culture. The U.S. Catholic Bishops have identified “the life and dignity of the human person” as an important theme in Catholic Social Teaching. They write:

In the Catholic social vision, the human person is central, the clearest reflection of God among us. Each person possesses a basic dignity that comes from God, not from any human quality or accomplishment, not from race or gen-

der, age or economic status. The test of every institution or policy is whether it enhances human life and human dignity. We believe that people are more important than things.²

If we appreciate how to uphold this value of all human life, we must not ignore that we are part of a larger ecological system. If the gift of creation has violence done to it, then we as humans, especially the poor, will bear the pain of refusing the gift that God gives us. John Paul II reflects on this idea in *The Gospel of Life*:



As one called to till and look after the garden of the world, persons have a specific responsibility towards the environment in which they live, towards the creation which God has put at the service of their personal dignity, of their life, not only for the present but also for future generations. It is the ecological question ranging from the preservation of natural habitats of different species of animals and of other forms of life – to human ecology, properly speaking, which finds in the Bible clear and strong ethical direction, leading to a solution which respects the great good every life.³

Violence, whether it is directed to an individual or to the eco-system, affects all things because of the interrelated nature of all life. We cannot pick and choose for political or personal expediency what we hold dear. The challenge in our current culture of violence is to find our points of interaction that allow us to use our power to uphold life.

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¹ Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, *Consistent Ethic of Life* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1988), p. 82.

² USCCB, *A Century of Social Teaching: A Common Heritage, A Continuing Challenge* (November 1990).

³ John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* (1995).

Questions

Return to the pieces of paper that name the violence you experience in your own life. How is life devalued in these cases? What is the cost to our society of the continuation of violence and devaluation of life?

If your worshiping community has both a “pro-life committee” and “peace and justice committee,” how can they be encouraged to work in support of each other’s efforts? How does a lack of unity contribute to the violence of our world?

How do you see the media, political, business and/or church leaders picking and choosing certain aspects of life to support at the expense of the larger fabric of human and ecological life? How does this selective support for life add to the violence in our world?



Prayer Activities

1. Continue to reflect and pray over the ways that you experience violence in your life. As you notice your pieces of paper this week and pray to overcome violence, add a prayer each time to be more aware and supportive of the ways to respect all human and ecological life.
2. Find one other person who may differ with your stance on social issues facing our society. Invite them to read, reflect, dialogue and pray over this reflection and the scripture for this first week of Lent with you. Pray together that you might be able to find common ground so as to lessen the violence in our world.

2nd Week of Lent: Seeking True Security

Security in the biblical worldview, is an outcome of pursuing [a] more comprehensive vision of shalom. When shalom is established through the pursuit of justice, then true security is found...Security is a state of being that flows from the inclusion of all in the bounty of the earth.

- Bryan Massingale

In recent years, especially in the wake of 9/11, we have experienced a very high level of personal and national vulnerability. In response, we have built higher walls around our houses and our country; we have bought bigger arms for private and public use; and we have posted stronger guards at home and abroad, yet we are increasingly *insecure*.

Let us take time this Lent to reflect deeply upon our understanding of security and to explore as followers of Jesus the values and priorities that guide us personally and politically. Let us examine the concept of security in the context of the community of all life and see how *inclusive human security* might flow from and enhance right relationships close to home and around the world.

Take a few minutes to reflect on the following: What is security? What gives you and your family or community a real sense of security?

None of us will ever forget the horrifying attacks of September 11, 2001. The events of that day delivered a tremendous emotional blow to all of us, shattering the sense of security that we had assumed as a nation. Immediately, however, in New York and Washington, hundreds of people clamored to help. The scenes in the rubble of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon became spectacular illustrations that life and the relationships that nurture life are vitally important to U.S. Americans. But since 9/11 we have not pursued the kind of right global relationships upon which true security is based.



Rick Ufford-Chase, former Moderator of the Presbyterian Church USA says, "Real security is when every family everywhere has enough to eat.

Real security is when every head of household knows that if he or she works hard they can provide a real future for their kids; an education and the possibility of a better life. Real security is when no one on the other side of the world or across the street can look at my lifestyle and make a logical assumption that my lifestyle is built on the backs of their labor. Real security cannot come at the point of a gun. Real security is about living the Gospel. Jesus says 'love your enemy, turn the other cheek, put away your sword.' With an extension of scriptural imagination he suggests, 'build houses for your enemy.'"

What is the connection between your security and that of your family or community and U.S. national security?

In the last fifty years the United States has been more and more clearly defining national security in terms of unsurpassed military might and unfettered economic prowess. For much of that time, communism was the enemy whose threat nearly occasioned a nuclear war and did provoke the U.S. to engage in long, "low intensity" wars around the world. Since September 11, 2001, terrorism has been named as the greatest security threat to the United States, and again, extreme measures have been taken in response: wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; vastly increased military spending (\$500 billion); plans for a 700 mile long wall at the U.S.-Mexican border; and laws that



allow torture, grant impunity to torturers and severely limit *habeus corpus* rights of prisoners identified as security threats.

A different approach would:

- guarantee that all people have access to food, clean water, healthcare, education and employment;
- recognize the right of people to authentic freedom, self-determination and full participation in important political and economic decisions that affect their lives;
- include a deep commitment to international cooperation and support for international mechanisms subject to the rule of law that could protect all people from genocide, terrorism, crimes against humanity and torture, prevent deadly conflict, provide conflict mediation, and promote post-conflict reconciliation.

What is your reaction to these very different approaches to security? What do the Scriptures teach us about security? How would you incorporate Gospel values into personal and national security decisions?

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Sources:

Bryan Massingale, S.T.D. Transcript of talk on Security to Round Table (February 8, 2003), www.archmil.org/resources/userfiles/MassingaleRoundTableArticle.pdf

Rick Ufford Chase on Security: <http://www.presbytery.org/news.asp?file=040830.htm>

<http://www.maryknollogc.org/peace/humansecurity.htm>



Prayer for Genuine Security

We come to you, O God, faced with the frightening prospect of continued chaos in Iraq and escalating insecurity around the world.

For an end to the violence,

O God of Peace we pray.

For an end to the mourning, an end to the suffering,

O God of Peace, we pray.

For comfort and the healing of broken hearts,

O God of Peace we pray.

For growing understanding and cooperation among peoples of the world,

O God of Peace, we pray.

Loving God, we are filled with a deep yearning for peace. We affirm our commitment to reverence the dignity of every person. We ask you to gift the human community with a new capacity to build right relationships in a bitterly divided world.

We ask this in the name of our brother, Jesus Christ. Amen.



3rd Week of Lent: The Struggle of Person vs. Profit

During the first weeks of Lent, we are called to follow Christ into the desert, where we will spend time in prayer, reflection, and purification. We may struggle with our inner demons and temptations. We may fast from the violence within us. We may pray that God will prepare us for the events of Holy Week and the final miracle of the resurrection.

One of the demons with which Christ struggled during his forty days in the desert (see Mt. 4:1-11; Mk. 1:9-13; and Lk. 4:1-14) was the seduction of money. Showing him “all the kingdoms of the world in their magnificence,” Satan said to Jesus, “All these I shall give to you, if you will prostrate yourself and worship me” (Mt. 4:8-9).



In the desert of Iraq during this Lent of 2008, there is space for anything but quiet reflection, as a violent war rages on for its fourth year. But the temptation with which Jesus struggled in the desert—for profit and wealth—is all too real. In fact, many are profiting from the continuation of violence in Iraq, and some are profiting at the expense of others. Here are a few disturbing facts:

- The office of the special inspector general for Iraq reconstruction (SIGIR), which was set up by Congress to investigate allegations of misuse of funds in Iraq, is actively investigating 80 cases of alleged fraud and corruption by contractors in Iraq and the Justice Department is investigating 23 others.¹

- The litany of large contractors awarded no-bid contracts in the beginning the war which are now being investigated for mis-spending is alarming. Halliburton subsidiary Kellogg Brown & Root (KBR) has been particularly criticized, having charged \$263 million in excessive or unsubstantiated costs for one project.²

- All the while, infrastructure in many areas is improving at a snail's pace, with ordinary Iraqis suffering the consequences. More than 75 percent of oil and gas restoration projects are still incomplete, as are 50 percent of electrical and 40 percent of water and sanitation projects.³ Electricity is at pre-war levels.⁴

- Yet, rebuilding, even if ineffective, has been a profitable venture for the contractors involved. Lockheed Martin's stocks are now almost two and a half times their value before Sept. 11, 2001. General Dynamics stocks have almost doubled as well, and company profits have tripled.⁵

Unlike Jesus, who was purified by and was able to overcome the temptation of profit and wealth during his forty days in the desert, those with power and influence have not been capable of doing the same in the “desert” land of Iraq.

During our prayer, reflection, and fasting during Lent, we sadly acknowledge, and pray for God's forgiveness for the “profitability of violence” that has been allowed there. The 20th anniversary of the



U.S. Catholic bishops' document, *Economic Justice for All*, took place in 2006, and we might find it appropriate to reflect on the bishops' words, which remind us that people should always be valued over profit: "The fundamental moral criterion for all economic decisions, policies, and institutions is this: They must be at the service of *all people, especially the poor.*"

We are called during this time of Lent not only to hold our nation accountable for resisting the profit temptation during war, but also to search deep within ourselves.



This Lent, let us venture into the desert. To prepare ourselves for the Passion and the Resurrection, let us struggle with our demons, especially those of violence and profit. Let us consider how to challenge ourselves, and others, to truly value people over profit.

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Sources:

¹ Glanz, James. "U.S. Agency Finds New Waste and Fraud in Iraqi Rebuilding Projects," *New York Times* (Feb. 1, 2007).

² Stockman, Farah. "U.S. Firms Suspected of Bilking Iraq Funds," *Boston Globe* (April 16, 2006).

³ Grier, Peter. "The \$20 Billion the US Gave for Reconstruction Will be Exhausted Within Months," *Christian Science Monitor* (June 15, 2006).

⁴ Glanz, James. "U.S. Agency Finds New Waste and Fraud in Iraqi Rebuilding Projects," *New York Times* (Feb. 1, 2007).

⁵ "Lockheed Martin Corp. (LMT)," Yahoo Finance, <http://finance.yahoo.com/q/hp?s=LMT&a=08&b=11&c=2001&d=00&e=26&f=2007&g=m> (Jan. 16, 2007).

Questions

What value do I put on profit in my own life?

When do I value wealth, or saving money, over people? Are there times when I am so concerned about making things easy, efficient, or cheap, that I forget about the people around me, or those involved in the process of making things easier or cheaper for me?

Do I ever engage in violent thoughts, attitudes, or behaviors, in order to get ahead of others or to make myself feel better? Where do I find utility in violence in my own life?

What am I called to do after returning from the desert? How can I help turn those around me away from violence? How can I call those who profit from violence away from sin and toward healing?

Prayer to the Desert Jesus

Make me like you, Jesus.

Draw me into the silence, summon me into the desert.

Let the silence slice my heart—
Reveal all my violence inside.

Open me to the struggle.

Cleanse me.

Make me whole in you.

Casting off the violence within,

Create my heart anew:

Ready to love, ready to heal,

Ready to proclaim a word of love and peace
to a violent world.



4th Week of Lent: The Prophetic Vocation

*Unless the grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains alone.
But if it dies, it bears much fruit. (John 12: 23-26)*

“Unless a seed falls to the ground and dies” were among the last words of Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero, the anniversary of whose martyrdom is celebrated each year on March 24. His is a story about death and Resurrection. It is a very familiar story – one so important that we retell it each year, accompanied by the solemn fast of Lent that helps open us to the story’s lessons of repentance and renewal.

Romero’s chapter of the great story is about a simple man who believed in God and who came to see life through the eyes of El Salvador’s poor. He walked in their shoes; he examined and judged the systems and structures of Salvadoran society by their impact on the poor; and he denounced unjust roots of their poverty with unwavering clarity.

The context in which Romero found himself is extremely important:

- Between 1975 and 1992, 70,000 Salvadorans were killed in a brutal civil war.
- Many of those killed were church workers – lay catechists, religious women, priests. Thousands upon thousands of others died for their faith. Most were Salvadoran peasants; some who gave their lives were from other countries.
- The war in which they were killed was not a war about religion – at least not on the surface, but a war about land and political power, wealth and ideology. It was a war fueled by geopolitical interests as defined in the Cold War, with the United States playing a major role.

To talk about Christ crucified in the 20th century

in Central America is not an exaggeration. To talk about Christ crucified now in Iraq, Afghanistan, Darfur, Colombia and elsewhere where war rages is not an exaggeration either.

Romero was a prophet in the most classical sense. He agonized over the hardness of heart that prevailed among the powerful of El Salvador. He cried out for an end to U.S. support for the forces of repression. He pleaded with the military to stop the violence. He guided the Church on a fine line between disengagement and partisan activity.

How do you think Romero would respond to the war in Iraq? What would be a prophetic response today? How are we called to step into contemporary violences?

Romero proclaimed the Word of God in such a way that it became flesh in the history of El Salvador and gave hope to the poor, announcing life and its fullness to the ones from whom he had drawn inspiration, and denouncing the poverty and repression that brought death to so many of his beloved people.

You have just heard in Christ’s gospel,” said Oscar Romero as death stood on his doorstep, that one must not love oneself so much as to avoid getting involved in the risks of life that history demands of us, and that those who fend off danger will lose their lives. But whoever out of love for Christ gives themselves to the service of others will live, like the grain of wheat that dies, but only apparently. If it did not die, it would remain alone ... Only in dying does it produce the harvest. (Brockman, 244)



When the signs of the times were hostile, even vicious, Romero risked stepping into the evil as Jesus did – to accompany the people in defending God’s cause, the cause of justice, from the effects of personal sin ... from the effects of social sin, social injustice, social violence.

As the United States continues its presence in Iraq today, what risks for peace are we called to take?

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References:

Romero: A Life, by James Brockman SJ, Orbis Books (1990) rev. ed.

Oscar Romero: Reflections on His Life and Writings. by Marie Dennis, Renny Golden, Scott Wright. Maryknoll, NY. Orbis Books (2000).

<http://kellogg.nd.edu/romero/Speakers.htm>



Prayer

God of Life and Peace,
 You inspired your servant, Oscar Romero,
 To be a prophetic witness for justice and peace.
 Open our hearts too to the sound of your call for
 peace in these times.
 Give us the courage to respond
 And the wisdom to know how.
 Help us to quell the violences in our world,
 Especially those for which we are directly respon-
 sible.
 Let us call all people brother and sister
 And contribute in palpable ways to the transfor-
 mation of the world.
 Amen.



5th Week of Lent: The Seduction of Violence

In a paradoxical way, violence attracts us even as it repels. Whether encountered in the media, for example, the movies of Quentin Tarantino [*Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Kill Bill*] or the excitement we sometimes feel at the prospect of armed conflict, violence has a deep hold on our psyches. It gives the illusion of control and simplifies our world by depersonalizing those who would be its victims.

In a recent article, Sabrina Tavernise writes:

I learned how much violence changes people, and how trust is chipped away, leaving society a thin layer of moth-eaten fabric that tears easily. It has unraveled so quickly. A year ago, my interviews were peppered with phrases like "Iraqis are all brothers." The subjects would get angry when you asked their sect. Now some of them introduce themselves that way.

I met Raad Jassim, a 38-year-old Shiite refugee, in a largely empty house, recently owned by Sunnis, where he now lives in western Baghdad. He moved there in the fall, after Sunni militants killed his brother and his nephew and confiscated his large chicken farm north of Baghdad. He had lived with Sunnis his whole life, but after what happened, a hatred spread through him like a disease.

"The word Sunni, it hurts me," he said, sitting on the floor in a bare room, his 7-year-old boy on his lap. "All that I have lost came from this word. I try to avoid mixing with them."

"A volcano of revenge" has built up inside him, he said. "I want to rip them up with my teeth."

["It Has Unraveled So Quickly,"
New York Times, Jan. 28, 2007]

But we know that violent offenders, when forced to acknowledge the humanity of their victims, are often overcome with remorse. The roots of redemption are also deep in our nature.

Jesus said: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God... You have heard that it was said to your ancestors, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills will be liable to judgment.'



But I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment, and whoever says to his brother, 'Raqa,' will be answerable to the Sanhedrin, and whoever says, 'You fool,' will be liable to fiery Gehenna... You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil. When someone strikes you on (your) right cheek, turn the other one to him as well... You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust." [Matthew, Chapter 5]

During Lent, we are called to search deep inside ourselves, past hatred and violence, to forgiveness and seeing the humanity of our "enemies." Lent is about prayer that changes and redeems. Let us bring redemption to our perspectives of others and attitudes about violence.

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Reflection Questions

How is violence and destructive power glorified in our culture?

Can you identify situations in which our nation has been “seduced” by violence? (For example, these might be situations in which violence has become the acceptable means of solving a problem.)

Where do you feel the attraction or seduction of violence in your own life?

The author states, “[Violence] gives the illusion of control and simplifies our world by depersonalizing those who would be its victims.” Do you think this is true?



Prayer of St. Francis

Make me a channel of your peace,
Where there is hatred, let me bring Your love,
Where there is injury, Your pardon Lord,
And where there's doubt, true faith in You

Make me a channel of your peace,
Where there's despair in life let me bring hope,
Where there is darkness - only light,
And where there's sadness, ever joy

Oh Master, grant that I may never seek,
So much to be consoled as to console,
To be understood, as to understand,
To be loved, as to love with all my soul

Make me a channel of your peace,
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
In giving to all men that we receive,
And in dying that we're born to eternal life



6th Week of Lent: A Holy Week Reflection on Torture

Methods of torture and its effects:¹

Torture can be physical and include various techniques including: beating, whipping, burning, rape, suspension upside down, submersion into water almost to the point of suffocation, and electric torture with shocks of high voltage on various parts of the body, very often on the genitals.

And it can be psychological, including threats, deceit, humiliation, insults, sleep deprivation, blindfolding, isolation, mock executions, witnessing torture of others (including one's own family), being forced to torture or kill others, and the withholding of medication or personal items.

Physical and neurological complications include soreness of wounds, painful scars, stiffness of limbs and muscles, atrophy and paralysis of muscles, hearing and vision loss, and persistent headaches. Torture survivors suffer psychological symptoms such as feelings of anxiety, guilt and shame, powerlessness in relation to the problems of everyday life, problems with concentration, poor sleep with frequent nightmares, and impotence.

Jesus was a victim of torture:

"You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think? They all condemned him as deserving to die. Some began to spit on him. They blindfolded him and struck him and said to him, 'Prophesy!' And the guards greeted him with blows....So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas to them and, after he had Jesus scourged, handed him over to be crucified. The soldiers led him away inside the palace, that is, the praetorium, and assembled the whole cohort. They clothed him in purple and,



weaving a crown of thorns, placed it on him. They began to salute him with, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' and kept striking his head with a reed and spitting upon him. They knelt before him in homage. And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the purple cloak, dressed him in his own clothes, and led him out to crucify him. [Mark 14-15]

Jesus' death and resurrection revealed the infinite value of each human being in God's eyes. Torture is a denial of that value. The Catechism of the Catholic Church condemns torture as "contrary to respect for the person and for human dignity," and *Gaudium et Spes* of the Second Vatican Council [#27] characterizes as criminal "all violations of the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, physical and mental torture, undue psychological pressures," including them in a list that also contains "all offenses against life itself, such as murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia and willful suicide."

Recently it has become clear that in their "War on Terror," the U.S. has engaged in torture tactics in places like Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, and possibly in secret CIA prisons as well. During this time, Catholic leaders have stood unequivocally against torture. A letter to Congress from the U.S. bishops in 2005 affirmed, "We believe that a respect for the dignity of every person, ally or enemy, must serve as the foundation of the pursuit of security, justice and peace. There can be no compromise on the moral imperative to protect the basic human rights of any individual incarcerated for any reason."

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¹ Amnesty International, <http://www.amnestyusa.org>

Questions

1. What can you do in your own life to take a clear stand against torture?
2. The Center for Victims of Torture advises doctors that if they treat immigrant communities, they will be treating some victims of torture. How can you offer support to torture victims in your own community?
3. What justifications for torture are used by the media and by some who are in power? How might you counter their message?
4. Torture is a particularly horrible manifestation of violence. Reflect on how the justification of violence and the justification of torture are related.
5. Holy week readings illustrate how Jesus suffered torture. Can you see the face of Christ in those--both innocent and guilty--who suffer torture today?



Prayer for an End to Torture

God of the world,

We live in a time of fear, when brothers and sisters look with suspicion at one another.

Some would tell us, "For the greater good, we must compromise the rights of a few."

God,

For the suffering mother whose husband has been seized,

For the child who heard them take his father in the night,

For the son who waits in a dark cell with unknown fate,

Help us to call our country to respect human dignity in every situation.

Let justice be done, and let our country remain just and fair,

Never abusing the rights of another human being.

prayer by Jill Rauh, Education for Justice