

Some years ago the issue of the reinstatement of the death penalty was being debated by the Iowa Legislature. The local representative in the House chamber was a Catholic and a member of the neighboring parish to the one in which I was serving as pastor. He was an outspoken proponent of its reinstatement. We had an exchange of letters on the issue. He, arguing traditional Catholic teaching which, while not promoting the death penalty, nevertheless permitted it if no other means of curbing violence was available. I, on the other hand, while not denying the tradition, cited official church teaching on this issue which had evolved under Pope John Paul II. In his address on January 1, 2001 for the annual observance of “World Day of Peace” the pope stated that given modern penal systems recourse to use of the death penalty is “unnecessary.” The Holy Father refined this teaching in his encyclical letter “*The Gospel of Life*”. Current Church teaching based on the encyclical as stated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2nd edition, # 2267*, states that bloodless methods of deterrence and punishment are preferred as “they better correspond to the concrete conditions of the common good and are more in conformity to the dignity of the human person” and that cases in which it is absolutely necessary to execute the offender “are very rare, if not practically non-existent.” In stating current Church teaching, I argued that it reflected the gospel call to conversion and the possibility of repentance, a process unique to every person, and, as such, reflects God’s mercy and patience toward us in our sinfulness. My friend the legislator didn’t buy it, at the time. However, sometime later, he said to me, “Father, while I haven’t essentially changed my position on the death penalty, I’m struggling with it in light of what you said.” I responded, “That’s how conversion works. It’s a process of grace; it takes time, and if we allow it, brings us around to God’s vision and action.”

Today’s famous gospel story has lots of avenues down which one could travel in meditation. I want to focus on two—Jesus’ action of writing on the ground and his dialogue with both the woman and her accusers. Just what was Jesus writing? No one knows. One interpretation is that his action “bought time” for the woman *and* her accusers and would be executors. By his action Jesus reflects the patience of God

toward sinners. Like the story in the gospel, there is no one here at Mass today who is sinless; only the degree is different. As the scriptures note, any sin is abhorrent in the face of the holiness of God. Secondly, the woman does not deny her act, nor does Jesus. He simply tells her after witnessing her confession and humiliation that she is free of her sin, but simultaneously calls her to on-going conversion instructing her to “avoid this sin.” As for the scribes and Pharisees, we are told they eventually dropped their rocks and drifted away, one by one. Perhaps, given time, they too, realized that while not guilty of the same sin, or a similar offense meriting the legal death penalty they too were sinners and not in a position to stand and carry out a death sentence of another human being.

Our most treasured prayer as Christians is the one attributed to Jesus himself, the “Lord’s Prayer.” But have any of us ever taken the time to reflect seriously on the petition, “forgive us (me) our (my) sins as we (I) forgive those who have sinned against us (me)?” These are serious words. In them we are asking God to be as generous, loving, merciful, and forgiving of us now “and at the hour of our death” as *we* are or have been to those who have injured us. Is this what we really believe? Is this what we really try to live? Is this *really* how we want to find ourselves as we stand before God at the end of our life? While we may not have personally put anyone to death physically for their crime or sin, whom have judged and condemned: given the “cold shoulder”, wrote off, thought or treated them as if they were dead, sent a twitter, tweet, or e-mail “bomb”, an anonymous cutting letter, or started or spread gossip that damaged or possibly destroyed their good name or reputation? What stones might we be holding?

St. Paul today exalts in the patience of God that brought him conversion and grace and transformed a persecutor of the Christian faith into its greatest preacher. Isaiah exalts in a divine mercy that not only forgives our sins, but forgets them allowing us to start anew. The challenge for us today, is to like God, delight not in the death of a sinner but through patience, prayer and love rejoice in his/her/our conversion and so live.