

No Excuses for Torture

Torture degrades both the victim and the perpetrator.

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Catholic teaching on torture is both simple and richly complex. On the one hand, the church's teaching seems straightforward: Torture is fundamentally incompatible with the dignity of the human person, and its practice is absolutely prohibited in all circumstances. On the other hand, both historically and existentially, the Catholic Church has more than a passing acquaintance with torture. Leaders and members of the church have been both victims and perpetrators. The

church looks to the cross of Christ and to the witness of Christian martyrs throughout the centuries in whose torturous sufferings it finds meaning and inspiration. At the time of the Inquisition and in many other historical circumstances in the past, however, the leaders of the church have tolerated and even supported the use of torture to achieve so-called higher purposes.

One of the great strengths of the Catholic tradition is the church's ability, under the inspiration of God, to repent of past errors and to seek the fullness of God's truth—a truth fully revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ but grasped only partially in each age by the sons and daughters of the church. Ours is a church of both saints and sinners, a dualism that offers insight into a complex ethical problem like the use of torture.

Torture is an issue of particular concern in the United States today because of ethically questionable practices tolerated under the exigencies of the "global war on terror." These practices include the waterboarding, or simulated drowning, of Al Qaeda detainees and "extreme rendition," the capture, detention and deportation of terror suspects, often to nations where the use of torture is common.

The Tortured Body

The church's contemporary prohibition of torture reflects a deep understanding of the human person and a profound vision of human society. In 1998 Pope John Paul II offered a reflection on the Shroud of Turin in which he connected the suffering of Christ to the inhumanity of torture. Pope John Paul said: "The imprint left by the tortured body of the Crucified One, which attests to the tremendous human capacity for causing pain and death to one's fellow man, stands as an icon of the suffering of the innocent in every age: of the countless tragedies that have marked past history and the dramas that continue to unfold in the world." The pope went on to ask: "How can we not recall with dismay and pity those who do not enjoy basic civil rights, the victims of torture and terrorism, the slaves of criminal organizations?"

Pope Benedict XVI made a similar association of the tragedy of torture with the suffering of Christ when he visited Lourdes in 2008. In a homily, the pope made a connection between the cross of Christ and those who suffer torture in his name:

By his cross we are saved. The instrument of torture which, on Good Friday, manifested God's judgment on the world, has become a source of life, pardon, mercy, a sign of reconciliation and peace. For on this cross, Jesus took upon himself the weight of all the sufferings and injustices of our humanity. He bore the humiliation and the discrimination, the torture suffered in many parts of the world by so many of our brothers and sisters for love of Christ.

In the teaching of the church, the suffering of Christ and of the saints, especially that imposed by torture, testifies to the reality of evil in the world. This testimony is not an acceptance of evil, but rather a call to overcome it. Catholics believe the cross leads to resurrection. Death does not have the final word. The victim on the cross was ultimately the victor. Life triumphed over death, good over evil.

Yet the followers of Christ have not consistently applied the lessons of the cross throughout the centuries. In a remarkably candid passage, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* acknowledges: "In times past, cruel practices were commonly used by legitimate governments to maintain law and order, often without protest from the Pastors of the Church, who themselves adopted in their own tribunals the prescriptions of Roman law concerning torture" (No. 2298). The catechism includes a compelling critique of the practice: "In recent times it has become evident that these cruel practices were neither necessary for public order, nor in conformity with the legitimate rights of the human person. On the contrary, these practices led to ones even more degrading."

A Threat to Human Dignity

The basis for the church's current total rejection of torture is its teaching on the life and dignity of the human person. The human person is created in the image of God. In Christ all are offered redemption without exception. In Catholic teaching, human dignity does not come from any human quality or accomplishment; it comes from God. For this reason, the catechism teaches, "It is also blasphemous to make use of God's name to cover up criminal practices, to reduce peoples to servitude, to torture persons or put them to death" (No. 2148).

The catechism later declares: "Torture which uses physical or moral violence to extract confessions, punish the guilty, frighten opponents, or satisfy hatred is contrary to respect for the person and for human dignity" (No. 2298). The use of torture dishonors the Creator in whose image every human person is created and disfigures the human person who is worthy of respect.

In Catholic teaching, there is more than one victim of an act of torture. First there is, of course, a profound concern for the immediate victim of torture, whose body and mind suffer assault. But the church is also concerned for the human dignity of the perpetrator of torture, who is debased by the act itself. This is why the catechism, as it calls for the abolition of torture, also asks Catholics to "pray for the victims and their tormentors."

Catholic teaching on torture sits within a broader body of teaching on a wide range of threats to human life and dignity. The Second Vatican Council taught in the “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World” (No. 27):

Whatever is hostile to life itself, such as any kind of homicide, genocide, abortion, euthanasia and voluntary suicide; whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, physical and mental torture and attempts to coerce the spirit...all these and the like are a disgrace, and so long as they infect human civilization they contaminate those who inflict them more than those who suffer injustice, and they are a negation of the honor due to the Creator.

Torture attacks the human dignity of its direct victims, but it also victimizes the perpetrators and any society that tolerates its practice. Torture contaminates society and debases it. This is true because the human person is not only sacred but also social. What we do to one another we ultimately do to ourselves, because as social beings our fates are bound together. A society that tolerates torture threatens the common good of all persons because it undermines respect for human dignity and basic human rights. These rights should find expression in laws that protect human dignity and prohibit torture and other actions that assault this dignity. For these and other reasons, the Catholic Church supports international humanitarian law that prohibits torture.

No Justification Under Any Circumstances

The church views torture as an “intrinsic evil” that can never be justified. The inevitable harm it does to individuals and to society as a whole allows no exceptions. To those who would advance arguments for the exceptional use of torture to protect public safety, the Catholic Church argues that we cannot do something intrinsically evil and expect good to come of it. In 2007 Pope Benedict reiterated the teaching found in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* “that the prohibition against torture ‘cannot be contravened under any circumstances.’”

In *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, the statement on political responsibility that the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops issued in November 2007 in preparation for the 2008 national elections, the bishops referred to the issue of torture five times. Echoing the catechism, they declared plainly that torture is “intrinsically evil” and “can never be justified” and stated categorically: “The use of torture must be rejected as fundamentally incompatible with the dignity of the human person and ultimately counterproductive in the effort to combat terrorism.” It is counterproductive not only because experts tell us that it does not work, but also because it undermines the very good it hopes to achieve: the common good of all.

In his encyclical letter “The Splendor of Truth” (“Veritatis Splendor”), Pope John Paul II indicated that we cannot make moral exceptions and perform “intrinsically evil” acts, even when our intentions may be good. He noted the Second Vatican Council’s absolute rejection of intrinsically evil acts that “infect human civilization and contaminate those who inflict them.” U.S. culture sometimes fails to grasp the insidious nature of intrinsic evil. It has not understood the corrosive effect of the acceptance of torture, abortion and other such acts on U.S. society. For example, in the television series “24,” the character Jack Bauer, whom some U.S. military personnel have stated they took as a role model, is presented as an entertaining hero, but his character is no social or moral hero. Jack Bauer’s use of torture undermines what he seeks to preserve and protect—the lives and dignity of ordinary people.

In a church of both saints and sinners, victims and perpetrators, Catholic social teaching on torture has special authenticity and credibility. In its service to the human family as it seeks the full truth of the human person, the church has come to understand and teach with honesty and clarity that the prohibition against torture is absolute. The act of torture is utterly incompatible with the dignity of the human person, and the practice of torture wounds the victim, the perpetrator and the common good of all.

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