

# Sermon Notes

June 2014 – Torture Awareness Month

## Definition of Torture

The National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT) uses the definition of torture included in Article I of the U.N Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. The Convention came into force on June 26, 1987, following ratification by the 20th nation. June 26th is now recognized as the UN International Day in Support of Torture Victims.

The Convention was signed by the U.S. in 1988 and ratified by the U.S. Senate in 1994, thereby becoming U.S. law.

Here is the definition of torture from Article I of the Convention:

*“For the purposes of this Convention, the term ‘torture’ means any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity. It does not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in or incidental to lawful sanctions.”*

The Convention Against Torture also prohibits cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment which does not amount to torture.

## Torture Does Not Promote Human Dignity

- Torture is immoral. It runs contrary to the teachings of all religions and dishonors all faiths. It is an egregious violation of the dignity and worth of every human being – both the torturer and the tortured. The Golden Rule makes it clear: torture should not be perpetrated on others because we would not want others to torture us.
- Torture is immoral, illegal and counterproductive. It causes profound and lasting harm, especially to its victims but also to its perpetrators. It contradicts our nation’s deepest values and corrupts the moral fabric of our society.
- Our faith teaches us the importance of treating all people with human dignity. Our government must follow that precept as well. Torture is always wrong. It is immoral to torture anyone – whether that individual is suspected of having done something bad or not.
- As people of faith, we know that brokenness can be healed – both in individual lives and in the life of the nation. All religions believe that redemption is possible. Learning the truth can set us on a path toward national healing and renewal.

## Faith Community Quotes on Senate Torture Report

**Rev. Ron Stief**, Executive Director of NRCAT: “The Senate Intelligence Committee took moral responsibility by voting to make public the truth about the CIA's use of torture. People of faith represented by the National Religious Campaign Against Torture believe that torture is always wrong. Admitting the truth about the United States' past is the first step toward redemption. And that step has to be taken.”

**Jim Winkler**, President of the National Council of Churches: “If elected leaders of the United States of America have the slightest interest in living up to the ideals of democracy and peace, they will not hesitate to make public the report on torture. The use of torture is abhorrent. Our leaders should express their deepest sorrow and regret for using torture, and they should publicly promise it will never again be employed by our nation.”

**Stephen Colecchi**, Director of the Office of International Justice and Peace at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops: “For Catholics, torture is an ‘intrinsic evil.’ Only by admitting our past mistakes can the United States take a clear stance against torture and regain some of our moral credibility as a defender of human rights for all.”

**Rabbi Jill Jacobs**, Executive Director of T’ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights: “The Jewish tradition insists that every human being is created in the image of God. American use of torture after 9/11 violated the sacred image of God. The Committee’s vote to release the executive summary of its report on torture represents an important first step. However, we still need better cultural and legal safeguards to ensure that such desecration never happens again.”

**David Gushee**, former President of Evangelicals for Human Rights, and a member of The Constitution Project's Taskforce on Detainee Treatment: “The first step in restoring the rules of morality and law in our country is to tell the truth about the actions of the CIA. I urge all Americans to read the report and relearn from it that torture is immoral, un-American, and ineffective.”

**Rev. Diana Gibson and Craig Wiesner** (members of Multifaith Voices for Peace and Justice): “We also approach this issue from our deeply held faith perspectives, firmly believing that torture is a sin against humanity and against God. Created in the image of God, every person, innocent or guilty, bears intrinsic worth. As human beings, we have a fundamental duty to protect that worth. Thus the wounds of torture permeate not only the victims, but also the whole society. The moral fiber of every one of us who looks the other way, who does not speak out, who does not demand an end to the cruelty and full accountability and justice, is compromised. Only sunlight can overcome the darkness and remove the stain of torture from our nation's future.”

## Background Information

- The U.S. government needs to be accountable to the American people. If our citizens are kept in the dark about government policies and practices – as has been the case up until now – the government ceases to be accountable to its people, and the United States ceases to adhere to its founding principles. Releasing the torture report allows the public to demand that our government lives up to its values.
- After the attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, the United States government tortured many detainees it suspected of having some connection to terrorism. The use of torture is illegal under U.S. and international law and considered immoral by all faith traditions.
- With a bipartisan 11-3 majority, the Senate Intelligence Committee voted on April 3, 2014 to release key portions of a report on an investigation into the CIA's use of torture. The report is said to describe morally abhorrent acts of torture and to detail how certain elements of the CIA misled government officials into approving the use of torture.
- The Committee report is based on information contained in several million pages of documents detailing interrogations of detainees in CIA custody. Senator John McCain, who was an ex officio member of the Intelligence Committee, has said, “It was not torture, or cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment of detainees that got us the major leads that ultimately enabled our intelligence community to find Osama bin Laden.”
- With this April 3, 2014 vote, our nation takes a significant step to shine a light on torture and restore human dignity. This is an important milestone in efforts to end torture.
- Voting to release the report is only the first step. The President has put the CIA in charge of redacting the report. This creates a potential conflict of interest since the report is critical of illegal acts of torture by the CIA and we must hold the President responsible for ensuring that any redactions are necessary for national security. The CIA should not be allowed to cover up information just because it is embarrassing or reveals immoral or illegal activity.
- The CIA already took steps to obstruct the Committee’s investigation into torture – by spying on the Committee’s work and attempting to withhold needed information. Now President Obama has given the CIA the responsibility of determining what should be made public. President Obama deserves a great deal of credit for banning torture on his second day in office, but unless the President wants to be responsible for covering up torture, he needs to ensure that the redaction process is carried out appropriately.
- Once the public is able to know the truth about our government's use of torture, we must take concrete steps to ensure that our government never tortures again.
- By providing us with the facts about torture, the Senate Intelligence Committee’s report will assist us in ending the debate on torture as the nation takes steps to ensure that torture will always be seen as wrong in all circumstances and help to ensure that torture is never used again in the future.
- The public has the right to know the facts about the CIA torture program. More importantly, having all the information will enable the public to effectively advocate for safeguards to prevent torture from ever being used again.