

Ending U.S.-Sponsored Torture Forever DVD Discussion Guide for Orthodox Christians

Introduction

Since 2002, the United States government has engaged in torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. These practices are illegal under U.S. law and considered immoral within most, if not all, faith traditions. However, a Pew Research Poll in April 2009 (see <http://pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=156>) indicates that only 25 percent of Americans believe that the use of torture is never justified.

This discussion guide was prepared by the National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT) to facilitate discussion of the video “Ending U.S.-Sponsored Torture Forever.” **You can view and download the video, order a copy of it on DVD for \$5.00, register to participate in this project and access all the resources and links mentioned in this discussion guide at: www.nrcat.org/300.**

The video describes the torture practices of the U.S. government since 9/11, portrays the lasting effects on the survivors of torture around the world, and offers perspectives from a variety of faiths. Most faiths affirm that torture is a moral issue and that torture is always wrong. The video makes the case that torture is always immoral – without exceptions. It is designed to increase understanding as to why torture is always wrong.

Seven different versions of this discussion guide have been prepared to address the needs of different faith groups: Orthodox Christians, Catholics, evangelical Christians, Jews, mainline Protestants, Muslims, and Unitarian Universalists. To download any of these versions, go to: www.nrcat.org/DVDguide.

Suggestions for Using this DVD

This video best lends itself to an adult Orthodox education or small prayer group setting. Many parishes have adult formation groups that meet to address a variety of issues. We have provided a one-session and a two-session option for video screening and discussion. Each session is designed for an hour or less. We have provided a time breakdown for each session, but it is just a suggestion.

This resource could also be used with:

- Small faith sharing groups;
- Older youth or college groups;
- Women’s or men’s organizations;
- Special adult education programs;
- Social ministry committee or meeting; and
- Ecumenical or interfaith meeting/group.

Preparing for the Discussion

We suggest that facilitators preview the video and read through the discussion guide to decide which resources to use and in what order you would like to present the material. Think through your own feelings and responses, so you are not surprised during the discussion. Feel free to add your own thoughts, questions, and prayers! The video includes many religious voices – all agreeing that torture is wrong. However, there may be a variety of opinions expressed during your discussion, and openness and honesty should be encouraged.

Here is a quick preparation checklist:

- **Register your participation in the project at www.nrcat.org/300.**
- Advertise early and often within and outside the parish. Announce it after Liturgy and in church bulletins and archdiocesan newspapers.
- Decide on the number of sessions.
- Determine the tasks you will accomplish during each session.
- Determine who will participate in leadership and reading of questions/prayers.
- Test the DVD with the equipment (DVD player and TV) you will be using for the session.
- Make copies of any questions, prayers, or Bible verses you may wish to hand out.

Additional Resources

As a facilitator you may want to visit or encourage participants to visit www.nrcat.org where we have a list of our member organizations, statements on torture from many faith traditions, further worship and prayer resources, and ways that your parish can become involved to end U.S.-sponsored torture. A link to a definition of torture used by the UN Convention Against Torture, which is U.S. law, can be found at www.nrcat.org/definition. Many of these resources could be helpful both in your preparation for the class and in your community's discernment about its response.

Session Outlines

Single Session Study

Welcome and introductions (5 minutes)

Ask participants to introduce themselves. Then introduce the session and the video. Here is a sample introduction: “The Orthodox Church has experienced torture since the crucifixion of Christ. Our faithful have long fought for truth and righteous living, even in the midst of evil. As Orthodox Christians in America, our voices matter and we have the unique ability to impact our government’s policies. Our faith affirms the sacredness of the person and the duty of the Church to protect human dignity. These beliefs have led many American Orthodox Christians conclude that torture is always wrong, including Greek Metropolitan Demetrios, Romanian Archbishop Nicolae Condrea, Armenian Archbishop Vicken Aykazian, as well as late Most Reverend Metropolitan Christopher of the Serbian Orthodox Church, may his memory be eternal. As we view a video on torture and discuss our responses, let us treat each other with grace and openness, keeping an open heart to the movement of the Holy Spirit during this session.”

Video Screening (20 minutes)

Insert DVD and select “For a single session” from the main menu. The video will begin screening immediately.

Discussion (25 minutes total)

We have heard several faith groups respond to US-sponsored torture. Now let us reflect on our own tradition’s history with torture.

1. Think about your own parish community.
 - a. Do we have anyone named after St. Katherine of Alexandria? She was tortured for her faith. Famously the torture wheel is now a symbol of St. Katherine.
 - b. Do we have anyone named after St. George? According to our oral traditions, St. George was tortured and martyred by the Emperor Diocletian.
 - c. Many of our parishioners are named after St. Peter, who was tortured and crucified upside-down. Many are named after St. Paul who was imprisoned multiple times and later beheaded.
 - i. The Orthodox Church has been shaped by brave men and women who experienced torture. Unjust governments tortured them for their faiths and threatened to degrade the image of God in them. (3 minutes)
2. Archbishop Demetrios connects the image of God in each person with how we should treat each other, even on a national level—“The deliberate torture of one human being by another is a sin against our Creator, in whose image we all have been created. This practice should not be condoned or allowed by any government. It must be condemned by all people of faith, wherever it exists, without exception.” In what way does our treatment of individuals honor God or sin against Him? Is there a way to treat our enemies that respects the image of God in them? (5 minutes)
3. In the video Brigadier General (Ret.) Stephen Xenakis, a Greek Orthodox Christian, emphasized that American military policy banned the use of torture from the time of George Washington. Why would this policy change? Why do you think the public let it happen? (5 minutes)
 - a. After his acceptance into the Orthodox Church, St. Vladimir instituted several reforms in Kieven Rus: public education, property rights for women, and abolition of capital punishment. He also abolished the use of torture even while most of the world used torture during interrogations. While the Western world prepared for Crusades, St. Vladimir made the revolutionary decision to outlaw the use of torture in his lands. Do you think his conversion

motivated these reforms? What about his faith would motivate such a radical stance against torture? (5 minutes)

4. In Romans 12:17-21 St. Paul, a victim of imprisonment and torture, tells us to repay evil with good. Let us read what he has to say. *Read passage.* (10 minutes):
 - a. In order to “live peaceably with all,” St. Paul suggests “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink.” How have we treated those we consider to be our enemies since 9/11? What emotions have motivated those policies? How do the teachings of our faith challenge us to overcome fear and achieve true and lasting security?
 - b. Some people of faith believe our country’s torture policies and practices indicate that we have “become overcome by evil?” How so? How can we “overcome evil with good?”
5. Listing markers of the Church, the writer of Hebrews encourages us in Chapter 13 verse 3 to “Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.” (NRSV) We remember the martyrs who were tortured in the past through our iconography and our namedays. Another important way to remember those being tortured is by becoming peacemakers.
 - a. St. Basil tells us that “there is nothing so characteristically Christian as being a peacemaker.” Looking at our country’s torture policies and practices, how can we be peacemakers and advocates for justice? (7 minutes)

Closing Remarks and Prayer (prayed by facilitator or a participant) (2 minutes)

Encourage participants to more closely examine Orthodoxy’s teaching on peacekeeping and resistance to violence. Here are sample closing comments:

“Every week during the Divine Liturgy we ask the Lord to “remember the travelers, the sick, the suffering, and the captives, granting them protection and salvation.” We already pray every Sunday for those being tortured as captives—I hope now that by participating in this discussion we can begin to speak out against US-sponsored torture. As representatives of God’s mercy to the world, may we fight for peace, justice, and ethical action. For the strength to act, let us pray to the Lord.”

For God’s mercy upon us, His unworthy servants, that we may all be protected from hatred and evil actions, that we may have instilled in us unselfish love by which all shall know that we are disciples of Christ and God’s people, as were our holy ancestors, so that we may always know to decide for the truth and righteousness of the Heavenly Kingdom, let us pray to the Lord.

For all those who commit injustice against their neighbors, whether by causing sorrow to orphans or spilling innocent blood or by returning hatred for hatred, that God will grant them repentance, enlighten their minds and hearts and illumine their souls with the light of love even towards their enemies, let us pray to the Lord.

For You are our sanctification and to You we give glory, to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, now and forever and to the ages of ages.

Amen.

(Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Insertion into the Great Litany)

Two Session Study: Session 1

Welcome and introductions (5 minutes)

Ask participants to introduce themselves. Then introduce the session and the video. Here is a sample introduction:

“The Orthodox Church has experienced torture since the crucifixion of Christ. Our faithful have long fought for truth and righteous living, even in the midst of evil. As Orthodox Christians in America, our voices matter and we have the unique ability to impact our government’s policies. Our faith affirms the sacredness of the person and the duty of the Church to protect human dignity. These beliefs have led many American Orthodox Christians conclude that torture is always wrong, including Greek Metropolitan Demetrios, Romanian Archbishop Nicolae Condrea, Armenian Archbishop Vicken Aykazian, as well as late Most Reverend Metropolitan Christopher of the Serbian Orthodox Church, may his memory be eternal. As we view a video on torture and discuss our responses, let us treat each other with grace and openness, keeping an open heart to the movement of the Holy Spirit during this session.”

Video Screening (10 minutes)

Insert the DVD and select “For two sessions” from the main menu. Then select “Session 1.” The video should begin screening immediately and is 10 minutes long.

Discussion (35 minutes)

1. How did you feel on 9/11? Afraid? Angry? (*Allow the participants to respond*) How should we as Orthodox Christians handle our fears about future attacks? What values should motivate what political decisions we support?
2. We heard from Matthew Alexander, a military interrogator, that the use of torture is actually counter-productive in gaining useful information for intelligence because the use of torture incites anger in others and inspires them to fight against the United States. How do you feel about the fact that we have used torture practices despite their proven liabilities? (8 minutes)
3. In the video Brigadier General (Ret.) Stephen Xenakis, a Greek Orthodox Christian, emphasized that American military policy banned the use of torture from the time of George Washington. Why would this policy change? Why do you think the public let it happen? (5 minutes)
 - a. After his acceptance into the Orthodox Church, St. Vladimir instituted several reforms in Kievan Rus: public education, property rights for women, and abolition of capital punishment. He also abolished the use of torture even while most of the world used torture during interrogations. While the Western world prepared for Crusades, St. Vladimir made the revolutionary decision to outlaw the use of torture in his lands. Do you think his conversion motivated these reforms? What about his faith would motivate such a radical stance against torture? (9 minutes)

Thank you all for your involvement in this group. In the next session, we will watch another video segment and hear from many faith traditions. As we hear from other religious contexts, we will once again be talk about how the Orthodox tradition specifically discusses the treatment of prisoners and the use of torture. In the next [week] (*whatever time will be between sessions*), we invite you to be thinking about how our Orthodox faith can help use view torture as a moral issue.

Closing Prayer (*you can pray or ask a participant to pray*) (1 minute)

Grant, O Lord, peace, love and speedy reconciliation to Your people whom You have redeemed with Your precious blood. Make Your presence known to those who have turned away from You and do not seek You, so that none of them may be lost, but all may be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth, so that everyone, in true harmony and love, O long-suffering Lord, may praise Your all holy Name.

(St. Nicholas of Myra Russian Orthodox Church in Amsterdam)

Two Session Study: Session 2

Welcome and introductions (5 minutes)

Depending on the size of the group and their familiarity with each other, ask each participant to reintroduce themselves or simply ask any new participants who did not attend the first session to introduce themselves. Then introduce the session and the video. Here is a sample introduction:

****“In the first session we looked at part of the video and focused on American identity and the issue of torture, reactions after 9/11, and comments from military officers about the efficacy of torture. The purpose of this discussion is for us to look at U.S. practices and policy through the eyes of faith. How do we deal with the fact that many Orthodox Christians believe torture is justifiable in some situations while reflection on Orthodox writers, theologians, and the experiences of our martyrs has led many others to conclude that torture is always wrong? Again, we ask that you keep an open mind to one another and an open heart to the Holy Spirit during this session.”**

Video Screening (10 minutes)

Insert the DVD and select “For two sessions” from the main menu. Then select “Session 2.” The video should begin screening immediately and will take about 10 minutes.

Discussion (30 minutes)

1. Archbishop Demetrios connects the image of God in each person with how we should treat each other, even on a national level—“The deliberate torture of one human being by another is a sin against our Creator, in whose image we all have been created. This practice should not be condoned or allowed by any government. It must be condemned by all people of faith, wherever it exists, without exception.” In what way does our treatment of individuals honor God or sin against Him? How should the image of God in each of us inform our understanding of torture policy? (5 minutes)
2. In Romans 12:17-21 St. St. Paul, a victim of imprisonment and torture, tells us to repay evil with good. Let us read what he has to say. *Read passage.* (10 minutes):
 - a. In order to “live peaceably with all,” St. Paul suggests “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink.” How have we treated those we consider to be our enemies since 9/11? What emotions have motivated those policies? How do the teachings of our faith challenge us to overcome fear and achieve true and lasting security?
 - b. Some people of faith believe our country’s torture policies and practices indicate that we have “become overcome by evil?” How so? How can we “overcome evil with good?”
3. Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, in his landmark book *For the Life of the World*, links striving for justice to the Eucharist and the act of eating: “One eats and drinks, one fights for freedom and justice in order to be *alive*, to have the *fullness of life*.” In what ways do these values of freedom and justice impact our stances regarding torture? Can freedom, justice, and fullness of life exist alongside a policy of torture?
4. Listing markers of the Church, the writer of Hebrews encourages us in Chapter 13 verse 3 to “Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.” (NRSV) We remember the faithful in the past through our iconography and our namedays. Another important way to honor the martyrs who were tortured is by becoming peacemakers.
 - a. St. Basil tells us that “there is nothing so characteristically Christian as being a peacemaker.” Looking at our country’s torture policies and practices, how can we be peacemakers and advocates for justice?

Closing Remarks and Prayer (*prayed by facilitator or a participant*) (2 minutes)

Encourage participants to more closely examine Orthodoxy's teaching on peacekeeping and resistance to violence. Here are sample closing comments:

“Every week during the Divine Liturgy we ask the Lord to “remember the travelers, the sick, the suffering, and the captives, granting them protection and salvation.” We already pray every Sunday for those being tortured as captives—I hope now that by participating in this discussion we can begin to speak out against US-sponsored torture. As representatives of God’s mercy to the world, may we fight for peace, justice, and ethical action. For the strength to act, let us pray to the Lord.”

For God’s mercy upon us, His unworthy servants, that we may all be protected from hatred and evil actions, that we may have instilled in us unselfish love by which all shall know that we are disciples of Christ and God’s people, as were our holy ancestors, so that we may always know to decide for the truth and righteousness of the Heavenly Kingdom, let us pray to the Lord.

For all those who commit injustice against their neighbors, whether by causing sorrow to orphans or spilling innocent blood or by returning hatred for hatred, that God will grant them repentance, enlighten their minds and hearts and illumine their souls with the light of love even towards their enemies, let us pray to the Lord.

For You are our sanctification and to You we give glory, to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, now and forever and to the ages of ages.

Amen.

(Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Insertion into the Great Litany)