

Showing the Love and Mercy of Jesus

By Bishop Victor Galeone

My dear friends in Christ,

Every Good Friday we hear Pilate demanding that Jesus answer his question, “Where are you from?” When Jesus remained silent, Pilate asked: “Do you refuse to answer me? Don’t you realize that I have the power either to free you or to crucify you?” Jesus answered, “You would have no power over me at all if it had not been given to you from above.” The Lord’s reply to Pilate acknowledges that the state does have the right to mete out the death penalty - a right that comes directly from God.

Elsewhere in this issue there is an article on capital punishment. (See page 10) Some people question why the church has changed her teaching in such an important area. As Cardinal Avery Dulles points out in that same article, the church’s position on capital punishment has been modified, not reversed. While admitting that the state still possess the right to execute criminals, today the church says that the state should exercise that right only if incarceration would be inadequate to prevent the criminal from inflicting further harm, a situation which is practically nonexistent in modern society.

In November, I issued a request that signatures be collected in our parishes for a petition, asking the governor to place a temporary moratorium on the death penalty. The purpose of the moratorium is to allow time for a serious study to be conducted on all ramifications of capital punishment specifically concerning the cases of 373 prisoners on Florida’s death row. My call for a moratorium received both positive and negative reactions. For example, someone asked me, “Bishop, let’s say that someone raped and killed a niece of yours, would you still be against the death penalty?” My position then would be the same as it is now. Yes, the authorities would have the right to execute the criminal, but I wouldn’t want them to. I’d want to show that criminal the love and mercy of Jesus, who, while being nailed to the cross, not only forgave his executioners, but even made excuses for them. Furthermore, I’d want to be sure that the criminal had enough time to realize the terrible crime he had committed and to ask the Lord for pardon. For that to happen, much time might be needed.

That was precisely the case with Maria Goretti and her 18-year-old assassin, Alessandro Nettuno. Though only 11 years old, she courageously rebuffed his attempts to rape her. In a frenzy, he stabbed her 14 times, abandoning her in a pool of blood on the kitchen floor. The next morning, with death just hours away, the parish priest of Nettuno asked Maria if she forgave her assassin. From her hospital bed, she feebly replied: “Oh yes, Padre, I forgive him. I want him to be with me in heaven one day.” At his trial three months later, Alessandro was unrepentant. He blamed Maria for all that had happened. “She threw herself at me like a slut. I did it to defend myself!” Since he was a minor, Italian law spared him the gallows. Sentenced to a 30-year prison term, he spent the first seven years bitterly angry, cursing the prison chaplain whenever he approached the cell. Then one night, Alessandro had a dream: “I saw Maria standing in a field of lilies. She had the most precious smile I’ve ever seen. Without saying a word, she proceeded to pick 14 lilies and hand them to me one by one. Then I awoke.” The next morning, he called for the chaplain to make his peace with God.

July 6th of this year marks the first centenary of Maria Goretti’s martyrdom. Let’s pray for our youth, that they will treasure their purity as Maria did. Let’s pray for those in prison, that they will repent as Alessandro did. And finally, let’s pray for ourselves, that we may show to everyone who may have committed a heinous crime the compassion and mercy and love of Jesus.