

Executions require Catholics to examine beliefs

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Two executions on Sept. 20, 2011, Troy Davis in Georgia and Lawrence Russell Brewer in Texas, illuminate the very real challenge of our Catholic beliefs in the sanctity of life.

Troy Davis drew international attention and outrage. Supporters from around the globe urged clemency for a man many believed was innocent. Seven of nine witnesses to Davis' crime recanted a portion or all of their claims that Davis shot an off-duty police officer, yet state and federal courts denied all appeals.

Lawrence Russell Brewer, on the other hand, was clearly guilty of an undeniably heinous crime. Brewer was one of three white men who chained James Byrd, Jr., a black man who was walking down a street at the wrong moment, behind a pickup truck and dragged him to his death.

As Catholics, we know that we are all brothers and sisters in Christ and Jesus commanded us to love our neighbors as our self. Seeing Christ in a death row inmate is no easy task, particularly with the kind of man Brewer appeared to be — an unrepentant white supremacist. Yet Brewer is as much our brother as James Byrd, Jr. This doesn't mean we condone his actions; it does mean we protect his right to life, and his potential for reconciliation with God.

That can be a hard pill to swallow, especially when we feel justified in seeking revenge. But being Christ-like requires that we transcend our more base human nature and seek inspiration in the divine. Jesus did not return violence for violence. Nor did he shun the sinner. Instead, he asked us to love our enemies.

It must be noted that Catholic teaching about the death penalty has evolved over time. For centuries, the Church accepted the death penalty in those cases where it was deemed necessary to protect society at large from dangerous individuals. In a modern society with the means to keep criminals incarcerated for life there are no longer compelling reasons to justify the death penalty. As Pope John Paul XXIII stated in 1999, "The new evangelization calls for followers of Christ who are unconditionally pro-life — who will proclaim, celebrate, and serve the Gospel of Life in every situation. A sign of hope is the increasing recognition that the dignity of human life must never be taken away, even in the case of someone who has done a great evil. Modern society has the means of protecting itself, without definitively denying criminals the chance to reform."

Or in the words of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, "the antidote to violence is love, not more violence."

There are secular reasons to oppose the penalty as well. Numerous studies have shown that the death penalty is ineffective as a deterrent, more costly to carry out than a life without parole sentence, and still imposed in a manner akin to "being struck by lightning," as one U.S. Supreme Court justice put it,

despite efforts to reform the process. In a national survey of police chiefs, the death penalty was considered the least effective method for reducing crime, and the most expensive.

We may see the harm in executing a potentially innocent Troy Davis. As pro-life Catholics, we must also decry the harm to life and dignity in the execution of Lawrence Brewer.