

Anti-Torture Workshop

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Rev. Mark C. Hallinan, S.J., Asst. for Social Ministries
Society of Jesus, N.Y. Province

I am still haunted by comments made by Rev. Chick Straut at one of the first meetings of religious leaders in New York City that led to the formation of this group – the Metro New York Religious Campaign Against Torture. Paraphrasing his remarks, Rev. Straut said that it was a sad day for America when religious leaders had to gather to confirm that torture was abhorrent to our most deeply held religious convictions, and that we had to convince our fellow believers of this truth. This is the continuing challenge for us as people of faith; to reconfirm that our religious convictions do not allow for the use of torture, and that we have a solemn obligation to ensure that our country does not condone or practice torture in our name.

At the heart of our rejection of torture is our shared religious conviction that each and every person is created in the image and likeness of God. Every human person, therefore, has an inherent dignity that must be respected and protected for it is divinely given. This is a foundational truth that unites us as persons of faith. Melissa Weintraub, in a paper prepared for Rabbis for Human Rights, has written: “Traditional Jewish literature employs the term *kvod ha-briot* (the dignity of created beings), alluding to the Creator as the source of human dignity and grounding the requirement to protect human dignity in the divine origins of the human being...The term *kvod ha-briot*...signals a form of unqualified, universal respect for human beings as such, intrinsic to their existence as

human beings, whether old or young, sick or healthy, *tzadik* (righteous person) or *rasha* (criminal), independent of social status, identity, or context.” In a recent public statement, the Islamic Society of North America stated that it “is committed to promoting universal human rights and the God-given dignity of all human beings.” The National Council of Churches, USA, in its recent statement on the disavowal of torture affirmed that the fundamental basis for that disavowal was the Council’s “affirmation of human dignity as revealed in scripture” and “the biblical truth that all humans are created in the image of God.”

This transcendent value of every woman and man that shapes our common religious consciousness has been enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights whose sixtieth anniversary we celebrate this year. It is not by accident that the dignity of the human person is the starting point for that declaration. Its preamble begins by declaring that the “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in our world...” Article 1 affirms what the preamble proclaims: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brother/sisterhood.”

We should not forget the historical context out of which the Universal Declaration of Human Rights emerged. In his recent visit to the United Nations, Pope Benedict XVI consciously called that context to mind: “The founding of the United Nations...coincided with earth-shaking upheavals that humanity suffered when the reference to the meaning of transcendence and natural reason was abandoned, and, in consequence, freedom and human dignity were grossly violated.” This is brought home to us gathered here tonight

by the fact that many of our Jewish brothers and sisters could not be with us because May 1st is their Holocaust Commemoration Day – a commemoration of the six million Jewish persons whose lives were brutally exterminated by a regime who took it upon itself to determine that there were those whose lives were void of dignity, void of worth, and thus they were free to snuff out those lives. It is also a day to remember that this was only possible because not only did so many stand idly by while this extirpation of human dignity was perpetrated, but also because others, including many persons of faith, found means by which to rationalize the denial of dignity of some persons so as to give freedom to the regime to act against these persons as the regime desired.

As persons of faith confronting the issue of torture, we need to call to mind this history – as uncomfortable as it may be for us, in fact, precisely because it is uncomfortable for us. We have to remember the implications of what it means for us to declare that all human beings are created in the image and likeness of God and hence enjoy an inherent dignity. Divinely given, our human dignity cannot be compromised or stripped away by human agency. No person, institution, or system has the right to deprive any human being of his or her dignity because that dignity is divinely given. This core tenet of our common religious tradition requires that when we see that the dignity of another person is threatened or compromised, we must act to neutralize that threat and to restore that person's dignity. We have a positive duty for the protection of human dignity.

This is what should naturally lead us as persons of faith to a rejection of torture. For what is a more fundamental violation of human dignity than to intentionally inflict severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, upon another person (the definition of torture as given in the *UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or*

Degrading Treatment or Punishment)? Equally destructive of human dignity is to subject a person to cruel or inhuman treatment, that is, to a significant level of suffering or pain, or to subject a person to outrages upon personal dignity, that is, actions inflicting a significant level of humiliation or degradation (these definitions as given to us the by the *International Committee of the Red Cross*). We, as people of faith, must be united in our insistence that torture, cruel or inhuman treatment of persons, and/or outrages upon personal dignity must be abolished in law and in fact. As citizens of this nation, we have a particular responsibility to ensure that our government is not actively engaged in, or complicit with, acts of torture, cruel or inhuman treatment of persons, or subjecting persons to outrages upon their personal dignity.

Incumbent upon us as persons of faith is to remind our fellow believers that we cannot allow ourselves to succumb to the philosophical rationalizations that some will offer as justifying torture, be those rationalizations the infamous “ticking time bomb scenario,” or the bald assertion that “desperate times call for desperate measures,” or the claim that “the ends justify the means.” As the United States Catholic Bishops have stated, “There can be no compromise on the moral imperative to protect the basic human rights of any individual incarcerated for any reason.” This point is affirmed by Melissa Weintraub: “Even the person of absolute lowest social status in Talmudic society – the non-Jewish slave whose labor and body belonged to another – possesses intrinsic dignity and must be compensated for encroachments upon it. We are to honor others regardless of whether they demonstrate self-respect; our obligation to treat others with dignity is not conditional on what sort of person stands before us.” For those of us in the Christian tradition to act otherwise is to commit sin as Glen Stassen, professor of Christian ethics at

the evangelic Fuller Theological Seminary, reminds us. “It is the sin of usurping authority and making yourself the replacement for God, the sin of dominating the powerless, the sin of violating God’s creation.”

It is also important for us to recall that in all of our religious traditions the opposition to torture is rooted not only in our core belief in the intrinsic dignity of all human persons, but in our commitment to what is commonly referred to as the “Golden Rule.” This ‘golden rule’ is simply the articulation of our belief that we should not act toward another in a way that we would not want them to act toward us. Pope Benedict, in his remarks at the United Nations, reminded us that Augustine of Hippo, in the fifth century, taught that the saying: Do not do to others what you would not want done to you “cannot in any way vary according to the different understandings that have arisen in the world” (De Doctrina Christiana, III, 14). In other words, the recognition that we all share a common dignity, and thus ought to live in common solidarity, compels us, regardless of our time or circumstance, to act toward others as we would want them to act toward us. We ought not to inflict upon others, what we would not want them to inflict upon us.

The problem, of course, is, again, the marvelous human ability to rationalize, or justify, a violent, or simply abusive response to someone whom we perceive to be an enemy against us. Indeed, the very classification of persons as ‘enemy’ to us serves to give us license to act toward those persons without respect to their dignity because we have depersonalized them. We have made those persons less than us and thus not entitled to the same protections to which we think we, ourselves, are entitled. The delicious, but bitter irony in this is that we then debase our own dignity as we act not as one created in the image of God, but as a wounded animal might react.

Dr. Ingrid Mattson, President of the Islamic Society of North America, was making precisely this point in remarks she offered at a rally in Washington in the summer of 2007. “The Qu’ran says, ‘Do not let hatred of others towards you to make you swerve from justice. Be just that is closest to righteousness.’ There is great wisdom in this admonition of the Qu’ran. It is not just our dislike of others, but their dislike of us that leads us to unjust acts. We become afraid of their hatred and so we react, forgetting our own selves. We become unjust. Torture aims to break not just the body, but the very spirit of a human being. As such, torture is a major transgression of God’s limits. The impact of such a transgression is not just on the victim, but on the souls of all those engaged in and complicit in the evil act. Compassion and mercy are shoved to the corner of our hearts or buried in self-justification. We become spiritually sick people, unable to engage even those in our own communities with justice and compassion.”

The cause to which we have committed ourselves – to abolish torture in law and in fact – is a sacred cause. It is a sacred cause because through this commitment we seek to honor and protect the dignity of all human persons; the dignity that is ours as individuals created in the image and likeness of our God. It is because this is a sacred cause that we ought not to grow weary or discouraged in our efforts to return this nation to the moral principles to which it once was firmly committed. We have to trust that the Divine is at work in our efforts to abolish our nation’s active engagement in, and complicity with, torture. We must, therefore, persevere in our efforts, confident of our ultimate victory over the evil which now stains the soul of our nation.