

Resist a Terrorist Victory by Rejecting the Use of Torture

Father Jack Bonsor

Torture is a barbarous act that is both morally reprehensible and practically ineffective. Our government's use of "aggressive interrogation" methods and rendering to other nations for torture is shameful. The Church teaches that mental and physical torture is intrinsically evil and never permitted (Vatican II, *The Church in the Modern World* .27, cited by John Paul II in the *Splendor of Truth*, .80). Yet in the wake of 9/11 most Church leaders have, along with most citizens, acquiesced.

I compose these remarks as we begin the season of Lent. This is the time when we prepare to celebrate the central event of our faith, Christ's death and resurrection. The cross is our defining symbol. It evokes the memory of an evil event when a just man was tortured and killed by those who sought to defend their political system and religious practice.

We tend to demonize those who killed Jesus. But I suspect they were honest men who acted with good intentions. They saw Jesus as a threat to their way of life. The Romans tortured and killed Jesus because they perceived him as a revolutionary, one who would throw off Roman power and make himself "King of the Jews." That is the accusation they hung on his cross as a warning to anyone who would challenge their authority.

Rome viewed itself as a civilizing force. Romans were convinced of their political and moral superiority. Their empire successfully spread Roman law and practice throughout most of the known world. They viewed their opponents as enemies of civilization. Some of this might sound familiar.

Terrorists present a real threat. They can do us great harm. But unlike Nazi Germany or Soviet Russia, they do not have the power to conquer our nation. While we hear a great deal about terrorists being a threat to our way of life, the great irony is that we are now abandoning our fundamental values out of fear for what they might do. Only we have the power to destroy our way of life.

This is not unknown in our country's history. During the Red Scares that followed each of the World Wars the rights of citizens and residents were widely abused. But the adoption of torture, and "rendering" to other countries for torture, is a tragic innovation.

I think it appropriate to ask whether the terrorists have not, with our cooperation, already won. For what do we become if we are willing to use torture? What does this do to our soul? What compromise with evil do we make when adapt the tactics of those whom we oppose? And how is it that people who glory in the name "Christian" either support or accommodate ourselves to the cruel treatment of our "brothers and sisters"?

Standing up for what is right during a time of crisis is neither safe nor easy. The silence of Church leaders does not absolve us of our duties as disciples of Christ and citizens. We must seek practical ways to oppose current government policies that demean our nation and its citizens. Let us resist a terrorist victory by rejecting the use of torture.

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