

# FROM THE PASTOR'S



## Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time August 16, 2009 B

### DEALING WITH THE MURDER OF ONE'S SON

The following was written by Kathleen O'Hara, author of *A Grief Like No Other: Surviving the Violent Death of Someone You Love*. The article appeared in the July 2009 issue of U.S. Catholic Magazine.

Ten years ago, on Memorial Day of 1999, I received the call every parent dreads. It was from a detective in Steubenville, Ohio. He asked me if I knew where my son was. My son Aaron had just finished his sophomore year at Franciscan University and moved out of the dorms into a house nearby.

On Memorial Day the house was broken into, and Aaron and his roommate Brian were abducted, taken to the woods in nearby Pennsylvania, and shot by two young men who were on drugs. Our families and hundreds of people from all over the country gathered at the university for prayer and to search for Aaron and Brian for five terrible days.

On the first Friday of June, we found them under two wild white rose bushes.

The ensuing 10 years have been a journey of grief. It is so hard to describe the unbearable pain that we felt as a family, that I felt as a mother whose beloved son was sacrificed to such violent evil.

However, we Catholics know very well the sacrifice that one mother made for her son to save the world—Mary, our blessed mother. And while I do not presume to be Mary, I have tried to follow her example in my life since the death of Aaron.

Patience, prayer, love, and faith have been the hallmarks of my journey—which is not to say that I did not grieve. I most certainly did. I felt extreme sorrow, guilt, anger, loneliness, despair. I am a psychotherapist and I knew that these feelings were a necessary part of grief. Still I wondered if I would survive them. I did with the help of family, friends, support, therapy, and the one thing which helped the most: my faith in God.

- There were several things I realized through my grief. *The first* was the fact that God did not murder Aaron. I did become angry at God for allowing this to happen. But then I realized it wasn't God who took my Aaron, it was two young men who did it. It is the evil in the world that kills the innocent, not God. God does not stop bullets; God permits us through our free will to hurt each other. And God does bring

good out of evil, or perhaps it is better to say that through God's grace we bring good out of evil. The words of St. Paul came to me over and over again: "All things work together for the good, for those who love God."

It was hard to see how that would happen, but I knew it was true. God's ultimate will, which prevails over all things, is different from our limited perspective of God's will.

- *Second*, faith is not a get-out-of-jail free card—it does not guarantee that bad things won't happen. We mistakenly think that if we do everything "right," God will protect us and keep us and our loved ones from suffering. Suffering is part of human life. If God would permit his only son to suffer, how can we imagine that we are above that? Our faith is there to strengthen and support us, to help us realize that there are many things we cannot control. Yet we can be sure of one thing: God is with us, carrying us when the road seems too long and weary.
- *Third*, there are no answers to certain questions. Why was my son murdered? I don't know and will never know until I am no longer in this life. Why *my* son? I don't know, but is my son any more precious than anyone else's son? When I die, all my questions will be answered. St. Paul tells us in Corinthians 13: "Now I can know only imperfectly; then I shall know just as fully as I am myself known."
- *The fourth* and most important thing to consider is this: When we say the Hail Mary, we say, "Now and at the hour of our death." This means that our faith is with us always—not simply in life but at the hour of our death. We are not abandoned in death. I believe it is in death that God is most fully with us, and we know that because we are people of faith, we will have eternal life. We know that death is the doorway through which we pass to be with God, the source of all life.

Many people ask: Where was God when our loved ones were murdered? Jesus, our Lord, was right there when Aaron was killed. To believe anything else would be to limit our God.

These realizations of my faith were the important anchors in the extraordinary grief I suffered after Aaron's death. God was with me during this long journey of grief that still continues today. He guided me across the dark ocean of despair.

### Three important principles

Through God's guiding light, I learned three important principles that helped me and supported my faith.

*The first principle is acceptance.* I think of the magnificent Serenity Prayer: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." This has been my guiding prayer, yet it took years for me to accept Aaron's death. And even sometimes today, I just want him to come through the door and say, "Hi, Mom, I'm back."

*The second principle is forgiveness.* This is a touchy subject. I recall that right after Aaron's death I received books from complete strangers on forgiveness. I was appalled. While I knew they meant well, I resented their insistence on immediate forgiveness before I had a chance to even bury my son. Forgiveness takes some of us a long time—and I needed to work on my anger first before I could forgive.

*The last principle is gratitude.* How could I be grateful when someone murdered my son? The answer is that no matter what has been taken, there is always something left to be grateful for, even if it is only the dear memories I have of him.

Practicing these principles is not easy, but slow, steady perseverance has helped me move out of the deep ocean of grief and toward some kind of new life.

And what about that "New life"? What does it look like 10 years later? Is there such a thing as a good life after such violence? The answer for me is yes.

Today I have a life that includes joy, but that is not to say that I don't think of Aaron every day. I do. I see him in the little things: the light, the flowers, the setting sun. I see him every time I go to Mass, with his sweet boyish grin, usually arriving late, but always there, giving me the sign of peace.

I have not moved on. Aaron is still with me, not in the flesh but in spirit. He is as real to me today as he was the day he was born. It is a hard thing, perhaps the hardest thing, to accept that my own son, my child, is not alive in the flesh—but I can still have a relationship with him.

Then again, that is our faith, is it not? Life does not end when the body is destroyed by violence—neither does love.

I think of the words from the Song of Solomon:

*Set me like a seal on your heart,  
like a seal on your arm;  
For love is as strong as death,  
a love no torrent can drown.*

Our love is as strong as death. It never dies—it continues into life eternal, and my faith tells me that one day I will see Aaron again. That is a faith I can believe in.

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### Opposition to the death penalty grows louder

The following are three excerpts from an article in the July 2, 2009 edition of the Florida Catholic, written by Laura Dodson, a member of Ascension.

#### THE ACCUSED

***"I forgive all of them."***

"I didn't know how to read, write or speak English. I was treated as the worst of the worst—this who was called monstrous! I believe it's my duty to speak out," said Juan Melendez, a former migrant farmworker who spent 17 years, eight months and one day on Florida's death row for a murder he did not commit.

Melendez, 58, was released in January 2002 and is now an Arizona-based public speaker and activist against the death penalty. He recalled his full life in the community at St. Isidro Parish in Maunabo, Puerto Rico, before he became a Polk County farmworker at age 18, and at 33 was accused, convicted and sentenced to death for the 1983 murder of Delbert Baker in his Auburndale beauty salon. Melendez credits his mother's relentless prayer of three rosaries daily with uncovering the evidence that led to his exoneration and release.

"There were times I wanted to commit suicide," Melendez shared. "Every time I got depressed, I prayed to God and God sent me a beautiful dream. I was wise enough to take those dreams as a sign from God to just hang in there."

Melendez said he bears no grudge against those involved in his case.

"I forgive the people who did this to me," Melendez said. "I forgive all of them. And now it's productive speaking out about the death penalty. I am totally focused on abolishing the death penalty—that would be the happiest day of my life!"

#### THE CHIEF JUSTICE

***"You can't rectify the mistake."***

Retired Florida Supreme Court Justice Gerald Kogan has spent close to 50 years devoted to the law and its fulfillment, starting out as a Dade County assistant state

attorney, then chief prosecutor, circuit judge, then administrative judge. In 1987, he was appointed to the Florida Supreme Court where he served until retirement in 1998. During his tenure on the Supreme Court, 28 people were executed and he personally presided over nine of them. Now in private practice in Miami, Kogan advocates against the death penalty.

“There is only one purpose of the death penalty—for society to wreak vengeance on the perpetrator,” Kogan said. “there’s never going to be closure. It doesn’t deter. Professional hit men are never caught. Most are crimes of passion with alcohol or drugs or mental disease involved. It’s a very, very expensive procedure. And the finality of the punishment is really final—if you find out you’ve made a mistake, you can’t rectify the mistake.

“There is no question in my mind at all that the death penalty has no place in a civilized society. We cannot, as human beings who are imperfect and in a system that is imperfect, try to come out with a perfect solution.”

### **THE VICTIMS’ LOVED ONE**

***“The antidote to violence is not more violence.”***

Kathy Dillon is a parishioner at St. Hubert of the Forest Mission in Astor. In 1974, her father, a state trooper in New York, was murdered and, subsequently, her boyfriend of four years was murdered as well.

“In the wake of a murder, we all feel deep sadness, outrage and vulnerability,” Dillon shared. “But the antidote to violence is not more violence. For me, an execution in response to a murder in my life would only have added to the horror and the trauma of the whole experience. I know too well the far-reaching, damaging effects of violence to want any more violence. One thing I know clearly, in my lifetime, I must give voice to my opposition to the death penalty.”

### **THE DEATH ROW WARDEN**

***“I wish I had never been involved.”***

Ron McAndrew worked in the Florida Department of Corrections for 22 years, and as warden at Florida State Prison oversaw the electrocutions of three men—the last Pedro Medina, whose execution “went seriously awry”—and then went to Huntsville to observe five executions by lethal injection.

“I didn’t find lethal injection to be any cleaner or more merciful than the electric chair,” explained McAndrew, a parishioner at St. John the Baptist Parish in Dunnellon. “It was not out of sight and out of mind. Looking back, I wish I had never been involved in carrying out the death penalty. Looking forward, I see the experience as a door-opener to work toward the total abolishment of the death penalty. I see it as my vocation.”

### **THE PASTORAL MINISTER**

***“I take each man where I find him.”***

Since August 1998, Dale Recinella, a deacon at St. Mary Parish in MacClenny, has served as the Catholic lay chaplain for Florida’s death row and solitary confinement. “I know everybody on death row and I go to every cell. I take each man where I find him and look for the opening to help him to move close and deeper into the reality of God’s love.”

Recinella has been on deathwatch a dozen times and witnessed five executions. “It’s a powerless feeling to watch someone whom you have experienced as a human being, whom regardless of what they may have done, you have seen the good in them and then you sit in front of that window and watch their life extinguished by other people. It’s hard to describe the depth of powerlessness,” he shared.

When asked how he is able to bear the experience, Recinella replied, “Again and again, I go to Mary watching her son die on the cross. That’s where I go to ask God to take that pain. The only way to stand at the edge of the abyss of evil and not lose our balance is to remember to look into the abyss of God’s love—it is always deeper.”

In 1999 the U.S Bishops issued a Good Friday statement on the death penalty, part of which states:

*“Increasing reliance on the death penalty diminishes all of us and is a sign of growing disrespect for human life. We cannot overcome crime by simply executing criminals, nor can we restore the lives of the innocent by ending the lives of those convicted of their murders. The death penalty offers the tragic illusion that we can defend life by taking life. Through education, through advocacy, and through prayer and contemplation on the life of Jesus, we must commit ourselves to a persistent and principled witness against the death penalty, against a culture of death, and for the Gospel of Life.”*

In Ezechiel 18:23, God, speaking through the prophet, declares that he desires not the death of the sinner, but that the sinner repents and lives. When we execute people, we are saying: “We are giving up on you; your life is useless”—something God would never say.

This week I return from the Ol’ Sod, and Fr. Charles returns to his Ol’ Sod in Malta.

Have a blessed week,

