

Images of Americans abusing Iraqis in the Abu Ghraib Prison have horrified people of good will around the world. Human beings should be treated with respect, even people who have inconvenienced us, hurt us, or fought against us. By using methods of torture as wrong as those of Saddam Hussein's regime, we have hurt our credibility as promoters of justice. We were hoping to convince people that the American way of life is a better way of life, but instead we have confirmed their worst fears that Americans are belligerent, disrespectful and profane.

Our leaders have quickly responded that not all Americans are like this, and not all those who serve in our military are like this. On Memorial Day weekend our country honors the dead, especially those who lost their lives serving in the armed forces. They died for the best ideals. These images have betrayed them; they reveal a side of our culture that is repulsive: a preoccupation with sex and violence.

Equally alarming are the American commentators who have wondered what all the fuss is about. They argue that a pile of nude Iraqis is not as offensive as the beheading of an American soldier. But both actions are crimes; both actions show a complete disregard for the value of human life.

In his Letter to the Romans, St. Paul distinguishes those who live in the flesh from those who live in the Spirit. Those who live in the flesh are transfixed by the deeds of the flesh. If this world is all you live for, you will satisfy the desires of the flesh through habits that lead to obesity, drug abuse and pornography. Some people think pornography doesn't hurt anybody, especially when they practice it in private with magazines, videos or the internet. But it does hurt. It teaches that people are objects, and that we have a right to satisfy our desires even at the cost of others' dignity. In extreme cases, pornography treats live human beings with disrespect, and it wonders what the fuss is over images of naked prisoners – we see nudity all the time on television; what's a little more flesh?

On Pentecost Sunday we celebrate the day that God sent the Spirit into the hearts of believers. As a result, the disciples burst forth from the upper room ready and able to proclaim the gospel. But Pentecost did something more for them. The Spirit filled them with a new way of thinking, a way that looked beyond the needs of the flesh. The Spirit filled those first disciples with respect and love for all people, even those who would disagree with them, arrest them and kill them. Paul says, "Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh; on the contrary, you are in the spirit, if only the Spirit of God dwells in you." This Pentecost let us recommit ourselves to the Spirit who lives within us, and beg for the gift of respect, that we might turn our thoughts away from the excessive desires of the flesh and toward the saving, charitable works of the Spirit.