

Pope John Paul II released a new encyclical this week on the value of human life. An encyclical is a letter from the Pope to the church and to anyone else of good will. It generally treats some important theme the Holy Father wishes to communicate. This is the ninth encyclical of this pope's career, so it stands as another milestone for our church. The early reports on this letter indicate that Pope John Paul reasserts the traditional Catholic teaching about respect for human life from womb to tomb. The newest contribution seems to be the Pope's stand on capital punishment. He has never stated so clearly his opposition to the death penalty. The bishops in our country have stated their opposition to the death penalty time and again. When the new catechism came out last year, they were surprised that it called capital punishment acceptable in some cases. The pope now states that those cases are very rare, if not non-existent.

Coincidentally now, just a few days after the encyclical was released, we hear the Gospel in which the scribes and Pharisees ask Jesus his opinion about the death penalty called for in the Bible in the case of this woman caught in adultery. People frequently wonder, "Why is this woman standing here alone? Where is the guy?" They have a point. The book of Deuteronomy says that if a man lies with another man's wife, or even with a woman before she is married, the two of them who committed adultery shall be stoned at the gates of the city (22:22-24). In Jesus' day, according to the account of his own passion, the Romans did not permit the Jews to carry out the death penalty. This is why Pilate had to get involved in the death of Jesus. Jewish law alone wasn't enough to have him crucified (Jn 18:31). The trap in today's Gospel made Jesus choose between the religious law which called for the death penalty and the national law which forbade it! In our country we have the reverse--the national law permits the death penalty, but our religious leaders don't support it.

There are two theories about what deters crime. One is punishment, the other is rehabilitation. Jesus decides to send this woman into spiritual rehab. It's where we all belong during lent. The penance we accept during lent is not meant to punish; it's meant to help us change our ways. When we sin, God does not desire punishment. God desires a change in behavior. Whatever we can do that urges criminals and sinners to change will reflect the mercy of God.

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