



Sister of Mercy, Mary Schmuck, serves with the Archdiocese of Louisville Catholic Charities Parish Social Ministry Department.

Vengeance Says Bad Things About Us

I recently heard someone note that these days no one under forty years of age reads newspapers anymore.

That I carefully scan 30 of them a week either says something about my age or my willingness to help make restitution for all the apparent opportunities missed by our younger people.

Lest anyone be too impressed, I do all this newspaper scanning as part of my service with Catholic Charities, Archdiocese of Louisville, among 45 of our parishes in 17 Kentucky counties. This newspaper checking helps me appreciate the contexts in which they live and serve.

Given this access to the printed word, I have noticed several reports and opinion pieces on the topic of the recent US Supreme Court ruling on Kentucky's lethal injection protocol—the way we currently go about killing (with quite a bit of pre-meditation) someone because they have killed others.

One opinion piece concluded with an observation that if there was cruel and unusual pain for the convicted person, such was probably nothing compared to that of the person(s) killed, their families and friends. Thus, in the mind of that writer, apparently there is little problem with the cruelty of this process. Meanwhile Kentucky has signed into law restriction of cruelty against animals.

It frightens me when I see apparently vengeful actions or read/hear us call for vengeance. Such expressions seem to indicate some disturbing features about US—whatever else is going on, whatever else another may have done. In this same vein I am very greatly distressed by our national willingness to torture other human persons for whatever professed reason. Are we

thus hardening our hearts, losing our souls? I can't see how history won't show we have lost the respect of other peoples looking for persons and nations acting with integrity in pursuit of our highest human ideals.

None of this concern negates the deep pain and suffering of victims and the grave injustice they experience, nor the need to justly stop a person doing harm, punishing them for wrong-doing, or protecting ourselves from those who would do our communities harm. But the ends here do not justify all means that we can devise, and OUR need is profound to remember that each and every single human person has human dignity that needs fundamental respect in all situations.

It seems then to me that not for nothing does God say in Scripture that "Vengeance is Mine." What does God do with that vengeance? It doesn't get used against us. After all, we are all sinners whom God calls to forgiveness of others.

Responding to persons who do harm has a bigger context with several components: society needs to be protected, we all need to strive much harder for crime prevention and poverty reduction, to challenge our violent culture on every front, to make punishment constructive and rehabilitative, to reach out to the families of both victims and offenders.

Fostering vengeance in my heart and among us is a killer though—not to mention our great need to stop cycles of violence. If we don't stop the violence cycles, we will indeed need to leave word for the last one alive the turn out the lights.

April 2008