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## Editorial: Torture as a wakeup moment

by NCR Staff

Editorial



*?The thought of Jesus being stripped, beaten, and derided until his final agony on the cross should prompt the Christian to protest against similar treatment of their fellow human beings. Of their own accord, disciples of Christ will reject torture, which nothing can justify, which causes humiliation and suffering to the victim and degrades the tormentor.?*

-- Pope John Paul II, before the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva, June 1982

*?Whatever is hostile to life itself, such as any kind of homicide, genocide, abortion, euthanasia and voluntary suicide; whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, physical and mental torture and attempts to coerce the spirit; whatever is offensive to human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution and trafficking in women and children; degrading conditions of work which treat laborers as mere instruments of profit, and not as free responsible persons: all these and the like are a disgrace, and so long as they infect human civilization they contaminate those who inflict them more than those who suffer injustice, and they are a negation of the honor due to the Creator.?*

-- *?Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,? Second Vatican Council*

No longer is there any doubt; no longer can there be any denial. The U.S. government has tortured in our

name. It has tortured detainees, in some cases scores, even hundreds, of times. Torture practices were not aberrations done by a few errant jailers. They were approved by top government officials and became an essential ingredient of U.S. policy in the fight against terrorism.

President Barack Obama's ordered release of four FBI torture-related memos last month confirms an ugly reality. We are no longer the people we once professed to be. And even if we do not lament, much of the rest of the world does. They prize our democratic ideals, and now we must reclaim those ideals. We have arrived at a new moment of clarity. And now we must act.

Fortunately, pressure is growing for full disclosure of the means by which torture entered our working lexicon. In order for our nation to reclaim its core democratic values, founded in Judeo-Christian human dignity, we need to know: Who first ordered and approved torture? What was its nature? Who carried out the practice? How widely and in what forms did it take place? These disclosures will lead to others and will widen a discussion, and, we hope, lead to purging and renewal.

Of course, there are some who argue that a congressional or congressional-appointed investigation into U.S. torture practices will distract us from other pressing national agendas, such as solving the current economic and environmental woes. Their arguments have merit. But in the final analysis we think we are big enough and wise enough to move forward on more than one front. It should become increasingly evident that, as a nation, we will not regain our core moral foundations, now so clearly lost, unless we are confronted with truths we might not otherwise want to hear. Covering the truth, hiding it from the people in whose name our government exists, will only further damage our nation and weaken our posture in the world. On the other hand, disclosing the most sordid mistakes we have made shows a unique strength in our character that, in turn, offers renewed hope to those around the globe who want us to succeed, who respect us for our values and not for our might.

We are, after all, a nation of law. If laws have been broken, if lies have been told to us, then consequences must follow. To do less is to cheapen each one of us, as citizens of this great nation.

There are many lessons to be learned. More that we might not have yet imagined are likely to come forth as this story and its cover-up unravel, as they have been doing in recent weeks with more torture-related disclosures surfacing in the media.

It should be evident by now that in some troubling ways our nation is not unlike many others that rationalize the use of torture. Amnesty International reported last year that 60 years after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which condemns torture, was adopted by the United Nations, people are still tortured in at least 80 countries. That report singled out the United States as an offending nation.

It should be evident by now that, under pressure, it is easy to lose our moral bearings. *The New York Times* reported April 21 that in a series of high-level meetings in 2002, Bush administration officials "without a single dissent from cabinet members or lawmakers" approved brutal methods of interrogation. "This extraordinary consensus was possible," the *Times* article stated, "largely because no one involved -- not the top two CIA officials who were pushing the program, not the senior aides to President George W. Bush, not the leaders of the Senate and House Intelligence Committees -- investigated the gruesome origins of the techniques they were approving with little debate."

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And what were the origins of these torture practices? Incredibly, they were patterned after the failed

practices of communists in the Korean War, methods that had wrung false confessions from captured American soldiers.

Many will assess the wider implications and results of those 2002 government officials' torture-initiating decisions. For the moment, we are struck by the ease with which a seemingly intelligent group of people, who profess decency and morality, are capable of losing their moral compass. Part of their explanation rests in the fear climate of the time following the attacks on the World Trade Center and the unknown nature of possible pending attacks. Nevertheless, the reported total absence of discussion or analysis of the meaning of what they were setting in motion and the consequences of their decision is mind-numbing.



It should give all of us pause. At a personal level it might lead us to re-

examine our own moral blind spots. It is no secret that our church is divided in aspects of its moral analysis of contemporary society. Virtually every Catholic professes to be 'pro-life.' Who among us does not applaud the paragraph cited at the top of this editorial taken from the 'Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World'? Who among us does not feel he or she echoes the sentiments of Pope John Paul II cited above?

At the same time divisions exist in personal moral assessments regarding the immoral practices within our nation and through the world. Simply put, the division is between those who believe the tragedy of legalized abortion is the foremost moral disgrace we face as a nation and those who believe it must be weighed within the context of many other moral disgraces. These divisions run up and down our church, through bishops, clergy, religious and laypeople. Sometimes these divisions are so deep that one side or the other tends to dismiss the position of the other. Might a renewed moral examination move us to ask ourselves if our position has hardened to a point of moral blindness?

In the end, the teachings of our church, the values that we profess as Catholics, as members of an even wider Christian body of believers, should serve as our primary moral compasses. These are all founded in the Gospel teachings of love, compassion, nonviolence and forgiveness, all core teachings of Jesus.

As our nation enters into what might be called a forced and fortunate moral reassessment, can we make this a personal moral reassessment as well? Or will expedience and our own personal moral blindness fashion another way? God is patient and forgiving, and God is not finished with us yet.

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