

Fordham forum examines response to torture by U.S.

Beth Griffin Catholic News Service | Oct. 28, 2008

NEW YORK -- A Fordham University forum talked about the response of American political, military, religious and medical groups to the use of torture in interrogations of prisoners by the United States since the 2001 terrorist attacks.

The Oct. 21 event was sponsored by the Fordham Center on Religion and Culture and drew 150 people to two sessions at the Lincoln Center campus of Jesuit-run Fordham University in New York.

The first session looked at movies, prime-time television shows and popular culture to examine public indifference to making a connection between actual violence and its depiction in entertainment venues.

"Torture touches on very primal human impulses of violence and the meaning of violence and how it can appear to be a solution to human problems," said moderator Frederick Wertz, professor of psychology at Fordham University.

He said it is important to understand how people are drawn to and affected by the portrayal of violence in media and popular culture.

Wertz said leaders in law, military, psychology, religion and other professions are "responsible for our human welfare and are the ones who should have the highest, most noble and intellectual and ethical values, not just in guiding their own professions, but in teaching us what is good and what is right and in bringing illumination to phenomena like torture and violence."

Retired Col. Patrick Lang, president of the Global Resources Group and a former defense intelligence officer, said the Army "understands fully that physical coercion is almost never an effective thing, and is destructive."

"If you let people do things forbidden by the Uniform Code of Military Justice, they become uncontrollable and you lose control, you break down self-respect and things go to hell in a handbasket very quickly," he said.

Lang said that persistence, insistence, trickery and deceit could be used in the interrogation of prisoners by military personnel, but the U.S. Army "never trained anybody to torture anybody to get information -- never. And I would know."

He pointed to several factors that led to the torture of prisoners in places such as the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, at Guantanamo and in "Afghanistan and every little rathole where they've managed to secrete people."

He said the government encouraged soldiers to see as enemies in a post-9/11 world "'these people' who attacked us, whoever they are, these dark-skinned people who worship a strange god, and find out what we want to know and we don't care how" you do it.

Lang said the government has to make it clear torture is a crime and will be punished, and the Army has to inculcate its higher values in a new generation of officers.

William Treanor, dean and professor of law at Fordham University School of Law, said: "In the last seven years, there has been a demonstrated commitment of the legal profession to the rule of law as a necessary anchor to resist temptation."

A glaring exception, he said, is former deputy assistant attorney general John Yoo, who wrote memos advising the White House counsel that certain extreme interrogation methods do not constitute torture, as long as the subject does not experience organ failure.

"When he did that, he was breaking the rule of law," said Treanor.

Treanor predicted the next administration would repudiate various legal documents that formed the basis for condoning torture. He said that process had already begun and Yoo's 2002 torture memo was withdrawn in 2004.

"The intellectual justification of torture began with St. Augustine, who justified what he called 'coercion' by distinguishing between the good of the body and the good of the soul," said Jesuit Father Drew Christiansen, editor of America magazine.

"You could torture the body for the sake of the good of the soul," he said.

Although this position was not universally accepted within the church, Father Christiansen said it persisted until Pope John Paul II on the first Sunday of Lent in 2000 issued an unprecedented jubilee-year "request for pardon" for the sins of members of the church, committed at times in the name of the church, including the Inquisition.

In June 2008, the U.S. bishops issued a Catholic study guide, "Torture Is a Moral Issue," looking at church teaching as it relates to the use of torture by government authorities around the world and mixing in biblical passages that evoke Jesus' call to "love your enemies."

The bishops' 2007 document, "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship," says conscientious Catholics are required to resist unjust war and torture, which Father Christiansen said "is exceptionally strong language." "Resist is a very strong word, meaning actively oppose," he said.

"For Christians generally, the way we need to think about torture is at the foot of the cross, which is itself an instrument of torture and death. It's there that our faith takes its beginning and so in responding to torture, we have to begin with that sacred memory," the priest said.

Stephen Behnke, director of the ethics office of the 150,000-member American Psychological Association, said his group has repeatedly restated its position that torture is always unethical, never justified and always prohibited.

He said there is ongoing debate about whether psychologists should ever work in settings where torture is taking place. Some argue that the presence of psychologists would assure that interrogations are conducted ethically and appropriately, he said.

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