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US Jesuit: Killing bin Laden could be justified

by Michael Swan by Catholic News Service

TORONTO -- The United States failed the most basic test of the golden rule in its reaction to the 9/11 attacks, but killing Osama bin Laden could be justified on the basis of the do-unto-others rule, U.S. Jesuit Fr. Harry Gensler told a gathering of golden rule enthusiasts at Toronto's Scarboro Missions.

The author of 14 books on ethics and logic said he would have preferred that bin Laden be captured, and he was appalled by celebrations over his death. But an argument for killing bin Laden could be made using the golden rule as a starting point, he said.

"You have to be able to say that if I do all those things, the acts of terror, etc., then I'm willing that I should be killed," said Father Gensler, a philosophy professor at John Carroll University in Cleveland.

On the broader question of all of the ways the United States has employed its military in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the government cannot claim a golden rule justification for its actions, said Father Gensler.

America's failure to even try to understand why much of the Arab world celebrated the attacks, or the situation Arab Muslims face, means the United States did not even begin to apply the four-step process of applying the golden rule, the priest said.

"First of all, get the facts. Why are people doing this?" said Father Gensler. "You don't have a lasting solution to world problems unless you do that."

Father Gensler's formulation of the golden rule says, "Treat others only as you consent to being treated in the same situation."

In a preview to his next book, "A Philosophy of the Golden Rule," Father Gensler laid out four steps for

applying the golden rule in any situation. Under the heading KITA, the priest encouraged about 50 people at the Scarborough Missions headquarters to "Know, imagine, test and act."

The first step in the KITA formula means knowing how your own actions would affect others, which is impossible unless you know and understand the situation. Imagining how your actions might be viewed by others requires thorough knowledge of their situation. Nor is it possible to test the results of a particular action without thorough knowledge.

"The heart of morality is the golden rule. And the heart of the golden rule is imagination," said Father Gensler, who added that a person cannot apply imagination in the absence of facts.

He was quick to concede it is difficult to consistently apply the golden rule.

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"You will never completely and adequately know how your actions affect other people. Nor will we ever be able to completely and adequately imagine ourselves as another person," he said. "But just because it's difficult doesn't mean you don't have to try."

Father Gensler acknowledged a link between the golden rule and spiritual discernment.

"Discernment is about figuring out what to do by figuring out what the will of God is," he said.

If God is perfectly wise, with perfect knowledge and wishes good for all people, then seeking God's knowledge and God's empathy with his creatures should lead to a perfect application of the golden rule, he said.

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