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Monk's story gives new reason for death penalty opposition

by Bill Tammeus

A small c catholic

Arguments against capital punishment come in many forms.

When I was a columnist and editorial writer for *The Kansas City Star* I would take almost any opportunity to express our editorial board's long-held opposition to the death penalty by writing impassioned editorials urging citizens not to let their government sink to the moral level of common criminals by killing people to keep them from killing people.

I have just read much more effective testimony against capital punishment by Catholic priest and Trappist monk W. Paul Jones in his soon-to-be-released book, *A Different Kind of Cell: The Story of a Murderer Who Became a Monk*.

It's persuasive because it's a true story about Clayton A. Fountain, once considered the most dangerous man in the federal prison system, a man who, as **St. Joseph Sr. Helen Prejean** writes in the forward to this book, "proudly confessed five brutal and intentional murders."

It's effective because it tells how the author and others worked to redeem this vicious killer's wasted life.

And it's a devastating argument against the death penalty because if Fountain could be rehabilitated -- so much so that he became a well-educated, articulate monk -- it's foolish to give up on anyone by resorting to execution.

There are, of course, many other reasons to oppose capital punishment -- including the possibility that the one convicted is, in fact, innocent. But Christianity is all about redemption, even in the face of ridiculous

odds. And the odds against Clayton Fountain were, in fact, ridiculous.

Because four of the five people Fountain murdered were in prison with him, authorities finally felt they had no choice but to create a special isolation cell for him. He was all alone with only a small food tray opening to the outside world.

Through the work of others, Jones eventually was drawn to the Fountain story and to Fountain himself. Jones would visit him under extraordinarily strict conditions. In the process he discovered a man with an intellectual and spiritual hunger -- who was a persistent dreamer. Jones and others began to imagine ways to support and encourage him as he spent the rest of his life in prison, there being no federal death penalty at the time Fountain committed his heinous crimes.

Jones finally wound up -- even if a bit reluctantly at first -- being Fountain's spiritual adviser for six years. In that time, Jones came to reaffirm how wrong-headed the death penalty is. Even though it didn't apply to Fountain, had it been in effect for him it would have precluded the possibility of him repenting of his past and becoming an educated writer, prayer warrior and advocate for others.

Eventually Jones helped convince the abbot at his monastery in southern Missouri to accept Clayton Fountain as a "Family Brother," or monk, even though Fountain remained in his federally provided cell, which was designated as his hermitage.

But no sooner had this been accomplished than Fountain died in prison, officially of "unknown causes," but apparently of natural causes. It was a terrible blow to Jones, to his monastic community and to Fountain's family.

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Jones writes: "Having walked the last nine years of Clayton's pilgrimage with him, I have no choice but to stand resolutely against the death penalty -- for anyone, anytime, anywhere. His reversal makes it clear to me that the execution of any human being for any reason is the insolent behavior of humans playing god, imposing limits on the God of Infinite Mercy."

This new book does not argue that the Clayton Fountains in our prisons should be released into either the general prison population or into the world outside of prison. There are good and sufficient reasons to keep some people behind bars.

But it does challenge us anew to find ways to oppose the death penalty wherever we see it. And that is reason enough to hope *A Different Kind of Cell* finds a wide audience.

[Bill Tammeus, a Presbyterian elder and former award-winning Faith columnist for *The Kansas City Star*, writes the daily "Faith Matters" blog for *The Star's* Web site and a monthly column for *The Presbyterian Outlook*. His latest book, co-authored with Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn, is *They Were Just People: Stories of Rescue in Poland During the Holocaust*. E-mail him at wtammeus@kc.rr.com.]

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