

## A Seamless Garment

For more than a decade I have been taking groups of young Aloysians and Ignatians on Immersions to the Philippines. On each occasion, we spend about four days working with the Jesuit Prison Ministry at the National Penitentiary, Muntinlupa, south of Manila. Part of that experience is to visit the now-disused building where, during the Presidency of Joseph Estrada, seven prisoners were killed by lethal injection – all of them poor. Estrada's successor, Gloria Arroyo suspended capital punishment in 2006 and 1,230 death row inmates were commuted to life imprisonment.

Upon arrival at this rather insignificant-looking building, the boys see the twin notices at the entrance: "Bureau of Correction" and "Lethal Injection Chamber". Immediately they sense the irony. Correction and execution. The same ambiguity has faced many in our nation in recent months as we have traced the fate of Andrew Chan and Myuran Sukumaran in Indonesia. If Andrew and Myuran were not rehabilitated (as evidenced by their reformed and influential lives) then what does rehabilitation mean? What then is a correctional centre? And with post-Easter season language still fresh in our minds, what about redemption?

So many factors compromised this complex case – from the initial role of the Federal Police, a corrupt judicial system, the absolute hypocrisy of nation negotiating mercy for its nationals on death rows abroad but lacking mercy at home, and a new President establishing himself as a tough guy in a tough landscape. But it has brought to a head, once again, an evaluation of capital punishment. In spite of all the evidence that capital punishment has no effect on the crime rate and is not a deterrent, people are still drawn to it. Many still see it as the ultimate price. It brings closure to victims and their families. It protects society. It is cheaper than a life sentence. However, many of our boys and staff who gathered in the Chapel by lit candles to pray throughout last Tuesday did not view it that way.

More than forty years ago, an American Catholic pacifist, Eileen Egan, first used the phrase "a seamless garment" to describe a holistic approach to the guarding of human life from womb to tomb. The phrase is taken from the Gospel description of Jesus' robe taken from him at the time of his crucifixion. Egan's approach was to be marked by a consistent reverence and respect for life. It was to demonstrate a consistency of approach along the spectrum from abortion, lethal eugenics, euthanasia, assisted suicide, and capital punishment.

Some fifteen years later, the then Cardinal Archbishop of Chicago, Joseph Bernardin, became an active promoter of this and what came to be known as a *consistent life ethic*. He once said, "When human life is considered 'cheap' or easily expendable in one area, eventually nothing is held as sacred and all lives are in jeopardy." We all admire consistency but we all know, in our human frailty, that consistency is often hard. A consistent ethic would mean that one could not cry out for the commutation of Andrew's and Myuran's sentence, yet at the same time endorse the execution of the three Indonesian Bali Bombers eight years ago.

The Prime and Foreign Ministers have this week expressed their displeasure at President Joko Widodo's actions (or inaction). So there will be some diplomatic tut-tutting but our Australian cattle producers will worry about trade, travel agents will look longingly to Bali and security personnel in the war on terror and the war on asylum seekers will not want intelligence channels to dry up. So, in spite of Mr Abbott's menaces, it will soon be 'business as usual'. As it was after the outrage against the execution of Australian drug trafficker Nguyen Tuong Van in Singapore ten years ago.

In October last, Pope Francis called for abolition of the death penalty as well as life imprisonment. He denounced what he called a "penal populism" that promises to solve society's problems by punishing crime instead of pursuing social justice. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, cited by Pope Francis in his talk, "the traditional teaching of the church does not exclude recourse to the death penalty, if

this is the only possible way of effectively defending human lives against the unjust aggressor,” but modern advances in protecting society from dangerous criminals mean that “cases in which the execution of the offender is an absolute necessity are very rare, if not practically non-existent.”

Old Boy Senator Barnaby Joyce has this week suggested we engage in a national debate over the issue of capital punishment. Though the death penalty was abolished in Australia thirty years ago (with the last execution eighteen years before that), perhaps it is time for us to consider more broadly that “seamless garment” of life. Our Christian hope is, after all, predicated on the promise that we “might have life, and have it to the full”.

One final consideration – only three weeks ago a 58 year-old man in Birmingham, Alabama, walked free from prison after being convicted of murder almost 30 years ago. It was at last determined that the bullets used in the crime did not match the gun he possessed. A death sentence does not afford second chances like that.