
Pastoral and Political Relationship

An article from the *Cathedral Times*.

Capital punishment as an issue has drawn much attention in the state of Georgia in the last several weeks. The question of whether there is justice, or injustice, in the death penalty has been addressed to the entire world as Georgia's justice process has reviewed the case of Kelly Gissendaner. As I write this, Kelly Gissendaner, sentenced to death for the murder of her husband, has had her execution postponed twice, in the midst of appeals for clemency, inclement weather, and questions about the drugs to be used. Her torturous journey, and the case itself, has prompted many of us to consider, and to re-consider, our own views on the death penalty.


The saga has produced both tragic and redemptive elements. Kelly's case particularly prompts me to salute the work of our cathedral's new Canon for Spirituality and Mission, the Reverend Cathy Zappa. As many of us know, Cathy has worked for several years visiting prisons. In a prison theology program sponsored by Atlanta-area seminaries (including Candler School of Theology, where she studied), she has met, visited, prayed with, and worshipped with many in Georgia's Arrendale State Prison. In most cases, she has shown up there without a particular political position to grind or a judgment to make. She has simply been following the call of Jesus to visit those in prison (Matthew 25:36).

I have been impressed with the way in which Cathy Zappa has maintained her relationship with Kelly throughout this saga. As Kelly's case drew more media attention, Cathy's role also drew media attention, and Cathy herself has been interviewed several times. Cathy did not seek those interviews, but she has willingly agreed to them in the hope that her words might play a part in saving a life. In the interviews that I have heard, I admired Cathy's sensitivity and respect. She refused, for instance, to be drawn into stereotyped and familiar arguments for or against the death penalty. Some of those arguments are quite legitimate, but Cathy told me quite plainly one day that she saw her role as "pastoral and not political."

That phrase, "pastoral and not political," stuck with me. Obviously, political roles are important in this world of ours; we need them. However, when our political positions become hardened and overly ideological, we risk turning real people into objects, using them, and even damaging them – the very persons we claim to be trying to save. Yes, we do need political roles; but, I believe the world needs pastoral roles even more. It is the way the Church truly cares for people, and loves people, that will make a difference. I understand that Cathy was asked on more than one occasion whether she was against the death penalty in all cases. Her questioners, including some on the pardons and paroles board, seemed to want to pigeonhole her into a category so that they could dismiss her testimony. Cathy Zappa, however, was not speaking for or against a political position; she was speaking for a child of God.

Many in our community are opposed to the death penalty, and many in our community can justify the death penalty. But even some who support the death penalty see reasons in Kelly's case, to grant her clemency. Indeed, our present justice system does allow for clemency; that's one reason we have a State Board of Pardons and Paroles.

There will always be political and partisan issues in our lives. From time to time, each of us takes a partisan position and we argue for it. Ultimately, however, the community of Christ, the Body of Christ, is not about political positions. The Church is about people and relationship. The Church is about community. Good politics is about community, too. I salute the way in which Cathy Zappa has witnessed to community, with respect and honor to all those involved, including victims and including those who disagree with her. The world needs good politics, for sure. But the world needs good pastoring even more. In Christ, good relationship will change the world.



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