

Father John Catoir

A Burning In Boston



Recently another ruthless murder was reported by the news media. A young female social worker in Boston was accosted by a gang of black youths who allegedly wanted to keep whites out of their neighborhood. They made the girl pour gasoline over herself, and then set her aflame. They ran as she, covered from head to toe with severe burns, made her way to a storekeeper asking for an ambulance. She was taken to the hospital where she subsequently died, but not before the police taperecorded her description of the incident.

FOR MOST Americans the story represented the most heinous and shocking crime imaginable — the cruel, premeditated burning of an innocent young girl who had come with good intentions, desiring only to help the people of the neighborhood. The very thought of such viciousness evoked streams of hatred and cries of vindictiveness from millions of people around the country. Our pagan instincts come alive when confronted with such injustice; we say and feel things in passion that we might not say or feel in a moment of deeper reflection.

Many people are convinced by such incidents that capital punishment is the only real answer to such a flagrant disregard of life, but I disagree with them. The penalty of capital punishment, according to hard statistics, would not deter criminals from their violent episodes. Too often the sheer need for “getting - back - at - the - culprits” is behind the capital punishment movement. It comes disguised as

a cry for law and order. This leads good people, lifelong Christians who should know better, to feel quite sane and reasonable in their readiness to vote for, or even go on record in public print, as favoring capital punishment.

But what are we to think when we consider the words of Christ, our Master, on the cross: “Forgive them Father, they know not what they do.”

Perhaps we cannot be so cool about it. Our blood runs hot at the thought of that girl in Boston. Our violence rages and for a moment, we’d like to waste the rats who executed her. If she were our sister, God only knows what we might actually do.

But if we should act in a way that Christ would not approve, it would be wrong and we might hate ourselves for it. Are we not asked to pray for the grace to forgive our enemies and do good to them who hurt us? God alone can attune our spirit to His. Fortunately there are sublime moments when the good example of others can help us to see ourselves more clearly.

THERE ARE the words of the girl herself, taped before she expired from her burns. In her final moments, she said something that astonished all who heard of it: she asked for mercy and leniency for her murderers. She gave them her forgiveness.

Let those who call for capital punishment with self-righteous spirit, stop a moment and see if their spirit is as clean before the Lord as that of this beautiful young woman. May she rest in His eternal peace, and may all men and women of conscience learn something from her holiness.