

Despite the loss of her mother and brother to violence, Sr. Terry Maher stands against the death penalty

You couldn't have blamed Sister Terry Maher for trying to write the letter.

Her brother, a police officer and a supporter of the death penalty, had been shot and killed in the line of duty. She knew he would have wanted her to write it. On top of that, he was the second member of Sr. Terry's immediate family who had died at another's hand. Her mother had been killed by a drunk driver 30 years earlier.

So she tried to write a letter to a Washington State Superior Court judge asking that her brother's killer be executed. She was angry at the man and would not accept his remorse for what he had done. She wanted him to spend the rest of his life in prison, preferably in solitary confinement. She desperately wanted her brother back. But as she sifted through her strong and complex feelings, a different letter emerged.

"The more I wrote the letter [asking for the death penalty] the more I realized I was doing violence to myself, to what I believed," said Sr. Terry who belongs to the Congregation of the Sisters of the Precious Blood. "I had to write a letter against it."

She admits that her letter requesting that her brother's killer be spared was not received well in her family. But her belief, as a Catholic and as a religious woman, in the dignity of every human person was a guide that she says could not be ignored.

"If I want to support the blood of Christ, the value of life, I can't pick and choose what part of life I stand for or against," Sr. Terry says. "If I believe that God dwells in you, does that mean that God jumps out of you when you sin, when you break the commandment 'thou shalt not kill?'"

This belief was certainly solidified by her vocation but Sr. Terry said biblical passages about how a murderer was to be dealt with stood out to her even when she was a teenager.

"I remember somewhere in the Old Testament I read that if someone killed another person they would not be touched. They would have a safe haven," she says. "I was struck by that."

Like many, Sr. Terry is hopeful that on Nov. 6 California voters will pass Proposition 34, the SAFE California Act, which would replace the death penalty with a sentence of life imprisonment without the possibility of parole. Despite her personal experience, public advocacy against the death penalty has not been a focus of Sr. Terry's ministry. She is a hospital chaplain at St. Bernardine Medical Center and a trainer in the diocesan bereavement ministry. She has also recently helped launch a training companion to the bereavement ministry that focuses on those who have lost a family member to murder.

Very often, those advocating for a death sentence will use the wishes of family members of a murder victim as justification. Sr. Terry said she believes, based on her own experience, that this is unfair.

"People are asked if [they] want the death penalty in the midst of emotional turmoil," she says. "They want that person back."

"When anybody hurts us our first reaction is to retaliate."

In her ministry to those who have lost a loved one to murder, Sr. Terry attempts to help lay out a path for that person to find reconciliation. She says she does not believe the execution of the murderer is part of that path because it does not fill the void of losing a loved one, nor does it allow one to

heal from the violent act.

"Reconciliation is like a reconnection," she says. "So that I don't let that murder put a straight jacket around me, so that I can live my life without having this action by another person define who I am or cause fear within me."

Last October Sr. Terry was part of a panel of speakers at a day of reflection for Catholic school teachers on Catholic teaching about the death penalty. She says it was the first time she had spoken publicly about her own experience with the death penalty. As election season ramps up, she says she is willing to talk publicly about her views on the death penalty if asked.

She recognizes the difficulty of the issue and says that those Catholics who support the death penalty will not change their opinion overnight.

"It's one thing to be told what to believe," she says. "But what we believe needs to touch us in the depths of our soul."

Sr. Terry's 2003 letter requesting that her brother's killer be spared wasn't her last letter on the subject. She says that every time someone in California – or elsewhere in the United States – is scheduled for state execution she writes the same letter.

"I don't want that person executed in my name," she says. "The blood of Jesus is being poured out."



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