

**BECAUSE A WORLD WITHOUT THE DEATH PENALTY IS A BETTER WORLD.
AND IT IS POSSIBLE**

TEN YEARS OF CITIES FOR LIFE AND OF THE INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN

Mario Marazziti

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m.marazziti@gmail.com

- Why are we here?
- The world is noticing. “There is no justice without life”. That is why it is important for us to ponder here how to get a process for stopping the death penalty underway and how we can make it an instrument of the past. Ten years ago the Community of Sant’Egidio started the Cities for Life movement, a movement of cities against the death penalty. Today more than half the world lives in cities. It was an insightful idea. These have been ten very important years. The same ones that marked the creation of the World Coalition against the Death Penalty. It seemed impossible as recently as the last decade of the twentieth century. The movement was divided on the local and the international level between supporters of a moratorium and supporters of abolition, while the number of countries that retained the death penalty was still high. There didn’t seem to be a consensus between the world’s major religious and secular cultures. Europe was not yet a Union. We worked to bridge these distances and overcome the contrasts. Today’s conference is one of the results.
- The Community of Sant’Egidio is Italian and European by birth, but it is now active in more than 70 countries. We could say that, while it has its roots in Europe, is just as African, Asian and American. It represents a path for reconstituting the ability to live together in lacerated societies, some torn apart by war: like we were able to exert influence twenty years ago to end the civil war that claimed a million lives in Mozambique, or a few years ago to help achieve the reunification of the Ivory Coast, divided by a five-year civil war. Or recently, promoting preventative peace agreements to head off the outbreak of civil wars during the transition from dictatorship to democracy in Niger and in Guinea Conakry. There are people here today who were witnesses to these peace efforts and who today have the responsibility of fostering these results putting war into the armory of the past. But after war, the abolition of the death penalty, the eradication of the principle of vengeance for wrongs endured in the past, has become an important key to reconciliation. As they know very well in South Africa after apartheid, in Cambodia and Rwanda, in Burundi. You cannot be healed of the wounds of genocide or racial hatred if you do not repudiate death, including the death inflicted by the State for serious crimes. This is clear

in the rules that the International court of justice has established: capital punishment can never be considered as punishment even in the most serious crimes against humanity.

- At the end, there is an awareness that you should never be like those who kill, whatever the circumstances.
- The Community of Sant'Egidio is involved on a planetary level in the dialogue between religions and different cultures and we have learned at the deepest level respect for different cultures and traditions. But loving and respecting the particularity of every person did not prevent us from seeing that there is no relationship between retaining capital punishment and maintaining a cultural identity. It's not true for Islam, where even in the Holy Book there is strong and profound evidence of a rejection of the death penalty and of the value of human life, even though there are contrasting expressions. It wasn't true for the centuries-old Japanese culture: when capital punishment prevailed undisturbed in Europe, for three centuries it disappeared from the punishments inflicted in Japan, substituted by exile, from the IX to XII century. It was Empress Saga who abolished capital punishment and her dynasty maintained the ban until 1156.
- It is said that when someone commits a violent crime and casts himself outside of the community, the death penalty is necessary. Just the fact that the person in question has been tainted with a crime places him apart from the human community. That's what the world, or most of the world, thought for centuries, thousands of years. In the West it was the theory of "amputating the limb" to prevent the disease from contaminating the whole body. But no human being ever stops being a human being, even the most violent, even if they act like an animal. You can never restore the life of a victim by taking another life. You can never alleviate the profound distress of families by eliminating another human life and creating new victims.
- The death penalty always existed. We know that, aside from few exceptions, the death penalty existed in all civilizations, including the West. Slavery and torture were considered normal for centuries, for thousands of years. They were considered natural aspects of society, part of economic development and of the natural rights of the winners.
- But today slavery and torture are illegal. It seemed impossible that a society could do without slavery in order to maintain an economic standing. Today we know that this was false. The death penalty seems to be the natural response to extreme violence in society and the state's duty to eliminate the criminal for the community's sake. But it isn't true. The time has come when the death penalty is becoming like an old TV in a museum, now that we live in the age of the smartphone, the iPhone and the Android.
- To begin with, why? Because when the state kills in the name of the community it lowers the whole community to the level of a killer. Because when the state kills at a distance of several years, in cold blood, it commits an action more brutal than the one perpetrated by the criminal in the grip of mental illness, or drugs (drugs play a part in the majority of capital offenses), or the throes of momentary rage, or of fear mixed violence and a violent education. The state commits a more terrible act because it adds a calculation and a scientific perspective that make a difference. It is the difference between a normal jail and a death camp, where every action is calculated to destroy. When it is the state that does the

killing there is a disproportionate use of force against a prisoner who is behind bars and can no longer cause any harm to the collectivity, thus rendering an action that looks more like a crime than an execution, revenge rather than justice.

- It doesn't make society safe, It always affects, to a disproportionate degree, minorities or the weakest brackets of society unprotected by effective defense mechanisms. There is not one single case in the world in which it is possible to assert a relationship between the death penalty and a reduction of violent crime.
- In the West it is said to constitute retributive justice. It doesn't matter if it serves a practical purpose. Which it doesn't, since fortunately there are more murders than executions. This is where the death penalty exposes an embarrassing hypocrisy in society, which promises equal justice for all. But if it were true that the death penalty is needed to protect society from the chaos created by a murder, thousands would be left without justice. Fortunately this is not the case.
- A simple question, one that a ten year old child asked me about a prisoner sentenced to death: "They kill him because he killed someone. Well then, after they kill him, who are we supposed to kill?" We also know that there is no small judicial problem regarding children in prison, who are in jail because they are children of parents in jail. It is such a big problem that in 2011 the U.N. devoted a World Day of discussion to it. What about the children of people who have been killed by the state? How much infinitely more severe pain do they endure? Is this not a side effect that justice cannot afford to cause? And the other relatives of the victims?
- We should never be like the murderers. This is the only response to violence of an advanced society, life and a higher more generous sense of life is the only therapy.
- Europe today, after two world wars, sees itself as a united entity, which inscribed a rejection of capital punishment in its identity charter for the very reason that it has seen too much death in its territory. Europe has decided to offer its experience to the world and plays an active role in the international effort against the death penalty, from Lisbon to Vladivostok, from the Urals to the Atlantic. With the exception of Byelorussia which, for this reason,, has not yet been admitted into the Union. Europe's choice is not human rights neo-colonialism. It is a decision to offer the best of itself to others, as the Nobel Peace Prize awarded this year to the European Union and this international symposium, organized with the support of the European Commission, shows.
- I agree with the words of Thrbjorn Jagland, secretary general of the European Council: "The death penalty is a travesty of justice." It gives the impression of justice, strength and muscles. But it doesn't help crime victims. Sometimes it transforms the victim into martyrs and transforms judicial errors into tragedy.
- The world is rapidly changing. In the 1970's, just 23 countries had abolished capital punishment. Today there are 141 countries that do not use it, either by law or on a de facto basis. For thousands of years the death penalty was popular all over the world and then a radical change occurred in the last fifty years. Close to 180 countries applied it in 1960, today only 46. A few days ago, only 39 votes were cast against the Resolution for a

Universal Moratorium presented to the General Assembly of the United Nations, which won record approval from 110 member states. History is speeding up. In 2011, executions were carried out in 21 countries. Since 2007, in the United States, New Mexico, Illinois and Connecticut abolished the death penalty. During these years, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan put an end to the death penalty. In Mongolia and China executions have decreased to a significant degree in the past three years. Gabon, Togo and Benin are among the African countries that abolished the death penalty in recent years. We are proud to have played a direct role – in some cases a major role – in these historic developments. Friends from Connecticut are here with us today, celebrating the abolition at this important summit and later at the Colosseum.

It is not a road devoid of temptations and risks of falling behind. In recent months there was the distressing news of a rise in executions in Iran, the revival of executions in India after several years, just a few weeks ago, and in Japan, with two executions in September. Yet, despite these episodes, the death penalty is on the wane.

Thus the meaning of this summit. Here, arguments and ways of getting rid of the death penalty have been proposed. It is a method made of respect, friendship, reasonableness: listening to each other, working together with objectivity today and tomorrow, uniting political, social and cultural responsibility. Combined efforts on the part of major state entities, like Europe, the countries represented here, from Switzerland to Italy, from Tanzania to Ethiopia, and neutral entities, like the major international and national humanitarian organizations: an operation of culture and political action that unites civil society, states, administrations, opinion-makers, cultures, religions, diverse points of view. Together it is easier to see better: to see that a world without the death penalty would be better and to fight the culture of death and a rise in violence.