



## Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development Office of International Justice and Peace

### Background on Torture February 2013

*“Whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, physical and mental torture and attempts to coerce the spirit; whatever is offensive to human dignity, ...: all these and the like are a disgrace...”*

*--Blessed John Paul II, Veritatis Splendor (echoing Vatican Council II)*

#### **BACKGROUND:**

Torture is a critical issue of our time. The depiction of coercive, violent, interrogation tactics in popular television programs like “24,” or in the recently released film, *Zero Dark Thirty*, have spurred debate over whether torture can be used or justified. There is also discussion on what constitutes torture, particularly in a post-9/11 world.

The United Nations Convention against Torture defines it as “any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person” to obtain information or a confession and where such an act is allowed by a public official. Torture can take many forms: severe beatings and mutilation, exposure to excessively warm or cold temperatures, stress positions, sexual humiliation, and threats of death to a detainee or persons close to him or her. Around the globe, torture can be even more violent and dehumanizing.

Despite torture being condemned by international human rights organizations, the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, and the Universal Church, a 2009 poll released by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life reported that 51% of Catholics agreed that torture of suspected terrorists could sometimes or often be justified; only 20% of Catholics believed that torture can never be justified.

Church teaching is clear. Torture is abhorrent and can neither be condoned nor tolerated. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* notes that “torture which uses physical or moral violence to extract confessions, punish the guilty, frighten opponents, or satisfy hatred is contrary to respect for the person and for human dignity” (2297). Quoting the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Pope Benedict XVI has reiterated that “the prohibition against torture ‘cannot be contravened under any circumstance.’” Torture is morally wrong and can never be justified because it debases human dignity of both the victim and the perpetrator, estranging the torturer from God, and compromising the physical or mental integrity of the tortured.

Torture is corrosive to the society in which it exists as it devalues human life and dignity. Any society that tolerates torture places the human rights of all of its citizens at risk. It creates a climate hostile to the dignity of the human person.

Torture is illegal according to international law and the Geneva Conventions. The Catholic Church is a strong supporter of international humanitarian law and its prohibitions against torture. As the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* states: “[T]he precepts of international humanitarian law must be fully respected.” U.S. moral standing and credibility were seriously compromised by tolerance of torture at Abu Ghraib. It is important for the U.S. government to demonstrate the highest

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ethical standards to restore global confidence in U.S. leadership.

There are also practical arguments against the use of torture. Often, popular culture portrays a “ticking time-bomb” scenario, where torture is used to obtain information from a terrorist that will save countless lives. However, many professional interrogators and investigators argue that intelligence obtained through torture is generally useless or misleading because victims give answers they think their torturers want to hear, not the truth. In the fight against terrorist organizations, torture can actually be counterproductive, hindering U.S. efforts by sparking anti-American sentiment and fueling recruitment of militants. Torture doesn’t make Americans any safer, or help obtain information that cannot be gathered by legal and moral means.

### **USCCB POSITION:**

USCCB has consistently and strongly opposed torture in a series of letters to Congress and the Administration, in public statements, op-eds, and in study guides produced in collaboration with the National Religious Campaign Against Torture. In their 2007 statement *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, the U.S. bishops declared that because torture assaults the dignity of human life, it is “intrinsically evil,” one of very few actions to be so labeled. USCCB advocated vigorously for a Presidential Executive Order banning torture and President Obama did so two days after taking office in 2009. The bishops continue to speak out against expansion of “enhanced” interrogation techniques and to call for the release of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence’s report on CIA interrogation practices so that the public becomes aware of past practices, and of the illegality and ineffectiveness of torture. Public scrutiny would help ensure that our government does not engage in torture again.

### **RESOURCES:**

**Torture is a Moral Issue** – This four-chapter study guide produced by USCCB’s Office of International Justice and Peace in partnership with the National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT), examines torture from the perspective of Catholic thought on human dignity, Church concerns, the teaching to “love your enemies” and action steps. Go to <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/torture/>

### **In the Footsteps of the Crucified: Torture is Never Justified - Just Faith Ministries**

This 8-session module focuses on the reality of torture and on inspiring examples of faithful and prophetic witness against torture by survivors, human rights groups, and concerned citizens. It was produced by NRCAT, Pax Christi USA, and the Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition (TASSC). Go to [http://www.justfaith.org/programs/justmatters-m\\_footstepsofcrucified.html](http://www.justfaith.org/programs/justmatters-m_footstepsofcrucified.html)

**Torture is an Intrinsic Evil** – This study guide designed for one-session includes a facilitator’s packet, video interviews with intelligence and human rights experts. Produced in partnership with NRCAT and USCCB’s Office of International Justice and Peace, this workshop addresses the moral and practical arguments against torture and is designed for youth and parish groups. Go to <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/torture>.

**National Religious Campaign Against Torture** (NRCAT) is a membership body of religious organizations committed to ending torture that is sponsored or enabled by the United States. Although USCCB is not a member, we collaborate with NRCAT and there are fifty-one Catholic organizations that are members. NRCAT provides a number of print and digital resources. Go to: [www.nrcat.org](http://www.nrcat.org).

**For information:** visit [www.usccb.org/about/international-justice-and-peace/](http://www.usccb.org/about/international-justice-and-peace/) or contact Virginia Farris, Office of International Justice and Peace, USCCB, 202-541-3160 (phone); [vfarris@usccb.org](mailto:vfarris@usccb.org).