

THE CHURCH RESPONDS TO TORTURE:  
TO BE INSTRUMENTS OF GOD'S PEACE, LOVE AND JUSTICE  
IN A BROKEN AND FEARFUL WORLD

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**PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.)**

OFFICE OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY  
Gradye M. Parsons  
Stated Clerk

April 23, 2009

President Barack Obama  
The White House  
District of Columbia 20500

Dear President Obama:

I urge you to work with Congress to establish a non-partisan Commission of Inquiry that is tasked with reviewing interrogation policies and practices in the years after September 11, 2001.

The Executive Order to Ensure Legal Interrogations that you have issued is an important step in preventing the use of torture against individuals in the custody of the United States in the future. Equally important steps are those which lead to an understanding of what happened, how it happened, and who was accountable. If those responsible are not held accountable, nothing beyond wishful thinking and admonitions exists to compel future leaders to resist the temptation to torture in times of fear or threat.

In 2006, the 217th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) called Congress to “convene an investigative body with the independence, stature, and broad investigative powers of the September 11th Commission to inquire into whether any official or officer of the United States government bears direct or command responsibility for having ordered or participated in violations of law in the mistreatment of persons detained by the government of the United States at Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib Prison, or elsewhere, or in transporting persons into detention in nations with known records of brutality and torture; to publish its findings and, if appropriate, to recommend the appointment of a special prosecutor if one has not been previously appointed.”

If the United States does not forthrightly address the concerns and doubts about the way we treat other human beings under our charge, we lose the moral ground on which we stand to speak to other parties about their treatment of other persons, including our own citizens. The God who made us all is the one to whom we are all answerable for how we treat each of God’s children.

I encourage you to exercise the leadership necessary to erase what many feel is a blot on our integrity as a nation and as a leader for democracy, humanitarian concerns, and human rights.

Yours in Christ,

Gradye Parsons  
Stated Clerk of the General Assembly  
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Enclosure: Resolution on Torture from the 217th General Assembly (2006)  
Cc: Senator Harry Reid, Representative Nancy Pelosi, Attorney General Eric Holder

## The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Speaks on Torture

“God created the heavens and the earth and made human beings in God’s image, charging them to care for all that lives; God made men and women to live in community, responding to their Creator with grateful obedience.” (*Book of Order* of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), G-3.0101a). Guided by this biblical understanding, through the years the Presbyterian Church has expressed concern for human rights in many ways, including opposition to the use of torture: “No human agency has the right to own, manipulate, brainwash, torture, physically eliminate, experiment with, or deny the existence of any human being.” (Presbyterian Church in the United States, 1978, p. 186). The 217th General Assembly (2006) recognized that “. . . the purpose of torture is not actually to extract intelligence but to break the sense of self; it is a form of intimate, humiliating terror, a crime against the human spirit and God’s image in us.” In 2008, the 218th General Assembly acted to “Direct the Peacemaking Program to identify or create devotional, study, worship, and homiletic resources, and make them available on the Web so that individuals, congregations, and middle governing bodies can lift up our opposition to torture and our commitment to human rights and ethical standards in interrogation.” Visit [www.pcusa.org/peacemaking/actnow/actnow.htm#stoptorture](http://www.pcusa.org/peacemaking/actnow/actnow.htm#stoptorture) to find links to recent General Assembly statements.

### Ideas for Action

1. Pray for all those who suffer as a result of torture: those who have been tortured, those who have inflicted it, those who have ordered it, those who have justified it, those who have allowed it to happen. Pray for true national and global security, justice, and peace.
2. Learn about the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)’s General Assembly policy on torture. The resource, *Resolution Against Torture*, contains the two actions of the 217th General Assembly (2006)—“Resolution on Human Rights in a Time of Terrorism and Torture” and “Petitions Against Torture,” an overture from the Presbytery of San Francisco. Download these and other General Assembly actions at [www.pcusa.org/peacemaking/actnow/actnow.htm#stoptorture](http://www.pcusa.org/peacemaking/actnow/actnow.htm#stoptorture).
3. Preach, or ask your pastor to preach, about this issue. June is Torture Awareness Month. June 26 is the United Nations International Day of Support for Victims of Torture, the anniversary of the signing of the 1984 Convention against Torture. For help in how to address this from the pulpit or in worship, see [www.pcusa.org/peacemaking/worship/worship](http://www.pcusa.org/peacemaking/worship/worship) or contact Carol Wickersham at [clwickersham@no2torture.org](mailto:clwickersham@no2torture.org).
4. Study the issue. Organize a group in your congregation or community. Free, easily adaptable curricular resources are available from No2Torture ([www.no2torture.org](http://www.no2torture.org)) or the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program ([www.pcusa.org/peacemaking](http://www.pcusa.org/peacemaking)). A new 50-minute DVD, “Ending Torture Forever,” and a multi-session Scripture-based study guide, “Way of Torture, Way of the Cross,” are available for a small fee from the National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT) at [www.nrcat.org](http://www.nrcat.org) (follow the “Act to End Torture in 2009” link). Individuals can sign up to receive updates from one of the organizations listed under “For More Information.”
5. Plan a seminar. Visit the Presbyterian United Nations Office ([www.pcusa.org/un](http://www.pcusa.org/un)) in New York to learn more about international laws against torture, ways the ecumenical community worldwide helps shape and support them, and how to be a faithful advocate. Contact Ricky Velez-Negron at [ricky.velez-negron@pcusa.org](mailto:ricky.velez-negron@pcusa.org) to begin the planning process.
6. Invite a guest speaker or preacher to address the issue in your community from a faith-based perspective. Contact Carol Wickersham at [clwickersham@no2torture.org](mailto:clwickersham@no2torture.org) for suggestions.
7. Add your voice and the voice of your community to the call for accountability through a Commission of Inquiry and/or through the appointment of a Special Prosecutor. Sign the NRCAT petition at [www.nrcat.org](http://www.nrcat.org). Circulate copies in your community.
8. Raise the profile of the issue. Write a letter to the editor, op-ed, and/or article for your church newsletter. Help people understand why this is a crucial issue for people of faith.
9. Let your elected officials know your opinion. Do not underestimate the power of a letter, phone call, fax, or visit. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)’s Washington Office ([www.pcusa.org/washington](http://www.pcusa.org/washington)) and NRCAT’s Action Fund ([www.nrcatactionfund.org](http://www.nrcatactionfund.org)) can identify effective ways to advocate.
10. Have a wall? Post a poster. Free posters with talking points and a mini-curriculum are available through No2Torture ([www.no2torture.org](http://www.no2torture.org)). These sum up the issue in a few succinct phrases and can provoke reflection and discussion. Additional ways to share the message include wearing a button, displaying a bumper sticker, or ordering a banner that can be hung outside your church from NRCAT ([www.nrcat.org](http://www.nrcat.org)).

### ***A Prayer for Our Nation***

Gracious God, in whom we live and move and have our being, we give thanks for your presence made known to us in the words, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, our Savior and Lord.

God of all truth, by whom all nations are judged and from whom nothing is hidden, we pray for the courage to face what we have done as a nation and who we have become as a people.

God of grace, grant repentance and forgiveness to leaders whose decisions have made victims of guards, interrogators, and prisoners through torture and cruelty.

God of love, grant healing and restoration to all those who suffer the scars of pain, hatred, guilt, shame, and self-recrimination.

God of peace, in whose outstretched arms we all find welcome, kindle within us the desire to love our enemies and to find ways to bring this about.

God of hope, heal our cynicism. Deliver us from adopting the terrorist ethic that the end justifies the means. May we not do what we say we condemn.

So, may we do justice and love mercy, and walk humbly with you, our God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

- **The Rev. Kermit D. Johnson, chaplain and major general in the U.S. Army (retired)**

### ***A Prayer of Confession and Illumination***

#### **Call to Confession**

If we tell ourselves that we have no sin we are deluded and strangers to the truth. This holds true for our national life, as well as our personal lives. In recent months memos, photos, and statements have confirmed and revealed uncomfortable truths about the treatment of detainees held by the United States. Today we pray for God's guidance and mercy as we struggle to know the best way forward. We pray recognizing that the truth is never the enemy or the problem; rather the truth will set us free.

#### **Prayer of Confession**

Holy God, nothing is hidden from you.

You know our thoughts and desires.

You know our personal and national secrets.

You know the suffering of the powerless in hidden prisons  
and the deliberations of the powerful behind closed doors.

You know things we would prefer not to think about.

Gracious God, shine the light of the Holy Spirit on us all.

Give us wisdom to discern when fear or arrogance has led us far from your will.

Give us compassion to see your face even in the guise of our enemies.

Give us restraint so that when anger is provoked,  
we might respond in ways that lead to peace.

Give us courage to know the truth,  
so that your justice might prevail and healing may begin.

We pray this because we are hungry for forgiveness,  
ready to do what is required,  
and certain of your mercy.

In the name of Jesus, our brother and savior. Amen.

#### **Assurance of Pardon**

Jesus was not defeated by torture or death.

His death and resurrection have freed us from sin,  
and freed us to witness to the power of God's merciful love.

- **The Rev. Carol Wickersham, sociology faculty, Beloit College, Beloit, Wisconsin; coordinator of No2Torture**

## ***In Our Name—In Your Name***

*A litany of confession and commitment*

This has been done in *our* name:

**Your children have been abducted in the dark of night.**

This we do in *your* name:

**We repent of deeds done in our name.**

This has been done in *our* name:

**Your children are humiliated, abused, maimed, and killed.**

This we do in *your* name:

**We remember the devastation that torture enacts.**

This has been done in *our* name:

**Your children have been banished to hidden prisons.**

This we do in *your* name:

**We name what has been done in the darkness as sin.**

This has been done in *our* name:

**Your children have unleashed an unthinkable horror.**

This we do in *your* name:

**We commit our faith, our bodies, and our lives to end the horror. Amen.**

- **The Rev. Mark Bradshaw-Miller, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Saint Louis, Missouri**

## ***A Prayer of Confession***

Compassionate and loving God, you created us for your glory and your purpose. We come as your people, as the body of Christ seeking your forgiveness. We admit, O God that we have failed to be your voice in the world.

Where there is hatred we have failed to sow love; where there is injury we have been slow to pardon; where there is doubt we have failed to invite faith; and where there is despair we have failed to bring hope.

God of love and grace, we ask that you will forgive us. Forgive us when we have failed to speak on behalf of our sisters and brothers, and we have allowed atrocious acts to take place. Many times we have forgotten that we are one body and are united in Christ our Lord. Our silence has made us partners in these acts of cruelty, and we ask your forgiveness.

Lord, let us be your instruments of peace and justice in the world. Let us seek to uphold and preserve the humanity of each child of God. Help us to be the voice to the voiceless. Grant us your grace and your peace, in the name of Christ our Lord. Amen.

- **The Rev. Olive Sampath Mahabir, stated supply pastor, Cadmus Presbyterian Church, Adrian, Michigan**

## A Litany of Ashes, Stones, and Flowers

### *Items needed*

- *A container with ashes*
- *A large bowl of water*
- *A basket filled with small stones, one stone per participant*
- *Long-stemmed flowers, one flower per participant*

### *Advance preparations*

*Have one worship leader hold the container of ashes. A second worship leader stands behind the large bowl of water. Place the basket of stones between the ashes and the bowl of water. Prepare a table with long-stemmed flowers on it and place it to one side.*

*(A worship leader raises the container of ashes.)*

One: For vibrant lives suddenly and shamelessly sacrificed, we lift up the ashes of our loss, O Source of Life.

**All: Hear our prayer.**

One: For the lives that continue, haunted forever by the pain of absence, we lift up the ashes of our remorse, O Wellspring of Compassion.

**All: Hear our prayer.**

One: For the conflagration of flames and nightmare images forever seared into our memories, we lift up the ashes of our pain, O Breathing Spirit of the World.

**All: Hear our prayer.**

One: For the charred visions of peace and the dry taste of fear, we lift up the ashes of our grief, O Infinite One.

**All: Hear our prayer.**

One: For all the deaths that have been justified by turning the love of God or country into fanatical arrogance, we lift up the ashes of our shame, O God.

**All: Hear our prayer.**

One: Transforming One, hear our plea that by your power these ashes will make fertile the soil of our future and by your mercy nourish the seeds of peace in each of us and in the world.

**All: Hear our prayer.**

*(A worship leader lifts a stone from the basket.)*

One: For the ways humanity pursues violence rather than understanding, we lift up the stones of our anger, O Breathing Spirit of the World.

**All: Hear our prayer.**

One: For the ways we allow national, religious, and ethnic boundaries to circumscribe our compassion, we lift up the stones of our hardness, O Wellspring of Compassion.

**All: Hear our prayer.**

One: For our addiction to weapons and the ways of militarism, we lift up the stones of our fear, O Source of Life.

**All: Hear our prayer.**

One: For the ways we cast blame and create enemies, we lift up the stones of our self-righteousness, O God.

**All: Hear our prayer.**

One: As we cast these stones into the troubled water of our times, Transforming One, hear our plea: Just as water wears away the hardest of stones, so too may the power of your compassion soften the hardness of our hearts and draw us into a future of justice and peace.

*(Invite the people to come forward for the imposition of ashes on the forehead. Invite them to name out loud the victims of injustice as they receive the ashes. Invite the people to walk by the container of stones and take one after they have received ashes. They then place the stone in the bowl of water, naming aloud any sin of which they wish to repent. After all the people have received the ashes and placed a stone in the bowl of water, a worship leader pours the remainder of the ashes into the bowl and brings out the table of flowers.)*

*(A worship leader lifts a flower.)*

One: For sowing seeds of justice to blossom into harmony, we cast these flowers into the water, O Source of Peace.

**All: Hear our prayer.**

One: For seeing clearly the many rainbow colors of humanity and earth, we cast these flowers into the water, O Infinite.

**All: Hear our prayer.**

One: For calling us to life beyond our grieving, we cast these flowers into the water, O Breathing Spirit of the World.

**All: Hear our prayer.**

One: As we cast these flowers into the troubled water of our times, Transforming One, hear our plea: Just as water births life in a desert and gives hope to the wounded, so too may the power of your nurturing renew our commitment to peace.

*(Invite the people to come to the table, take a flower, and place it in the large bowl of water.)*

- **The Rev. Kirsten Klepfer, pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Grinnell, Iowa, adapted this from a litany originally written by the Rev. Patricia Pierce, pastor of Tabernacle United Church, and Rabbi Arthur Waskow of The Shalom Center, both in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. They wrote it in memory of the dead of 9/11, Iraq, and all victims of war and terrorism. Used with permission.**

### ***A Prayer for Those Affected by Torture***

God, who is the source of all life, we pray for our sisters and brothers.

... for those affected by torture, whether physical or mental.

... for those who suffer brutal violence.

... for those who are mocked and humiliated and disempowered.

... for those who are shown no mercy.

... for those who are forced to exist in a state of perpetual terror, and who experience life-long trauma.

... for those whose precious humanity is taken away.

... for those who are not given the chance to live the gift of life, but instead fear for that life every moment.

Provide signs of your presence. Grant strength and courage and all that is needed for the living of these days. Guide the nations and peoples of the world to turn from policies and practices that violate one another. Move us to act in that cause. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

- **Katie Anderson, student, McCormick Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois**

### ***A Prayer Based on Psalm 42 and 43***

God of the Universe, Creator of All Life, as deer long for flowing streams, our souls thirst for you, our living God. You are our rock and our redeemer. Even at night your song lingers with us. In you rests all hope. We praise your holy name again and again.

But our souls are downcast, our hearts restless. We fear you have forgotten us, that the waves and billows of your power have gone over us. And we know the depths of human despair. The shackles of darkness and disobedience separate us from you as a desert surrounds the springs. Our tears have become our food day and night.

Our tears fall for our brothers and sisters who helplessly suffer humiliation and anguish. They fear for their lives. Their tears are their food day and night. Together we cry out, for in their tears we see the horrifying reflections of other brothers and sisters whose humanity is threatened by their own actions. They feel confusion, fear, and anger. The shackles of darkness and disobedience separate them from you as a desert surrounds the springs. These same shackles chain us to our fear, and we fall silent. Our hearts are torn. Our souls yearn to act for your justice, yet we become complicit.

- **Deb Bowsher**

## ***No2Torture!***

What happened that the world doesn't know  
what the church stands for?  
What happened? What happened? What happened?  
What have we in the church been doing  
when we should have been voicing,  
should have been making clear  
who we are ...  
who Jesus is????  
Has it come to this?  
That we in the church must say,  
must shout,  
must stand  
for what we believe?  
Does the world no longer know us  
by our fruits?  
Do we have to have a discussion,  
to inform the world that the Church says  
No2Torture?  
Is there any doubt that  
the Church of Jesus Christ  
does not condone torture?  
Any question,  
any room for discussion?  
What happened to  
the Church of Jesus Christ?  
Jesus, who said,  
"Love your neighbor as you love yourself"?  
Jesus, who said,  
"Do unto others as you would have  
them do unto you"?  
What happened?  
Who is it who came along and  
changed the Word of God?  
There is no room for  
torture in the words of Jesus.  
He did not say:  
Return evil for evil.  
He did not say:  
Hit back.  
He said, "Turn the other cheek."  
He said, "Love your enemies."  
He said, "Follow me."  
The world should have heard us  
shouting good news from the roof tops,  
singing Alleluias in the streets of the world!  
The world should have seen us  
praying for our enemies.  
The world should have seen us  
following the Prince of Peace.  
Oh, God, may they see us now!  
Oh, God, may they hear us now!  
No2Torture!

- **Ann Weems, writer, poet, keynote speaker, worship designer, liturgist, and workshop leader; written May 4, 2007; used by permission of the author.**



### ***A Prayer Related to Torture***

God for all the world,  
We pray for our brothers and sisters  
throughout your world  
who endure torture  
physically,  
spiritually,  
emotionally.  
In their pain  
may they experience your presence and care,  
binding their wounds,  
supporting them.  
We pray for our brothers and sisters  
throughout your world  
who inflict torture  
physically,  
spiritually,  
emotionally.  
May they experience your presence and care,  
binding the wounds they bear,  
wounds they receive as they wound others.  
Open them to see the dignity of each person.  
Strengthen them to seek ways  
to break free from violence.  
We pray for our brothers and sisters  
throughout your world  
who authorize torture  
physically,  
spiritually,  
emotionally.  
Break the hold of fear and anger upon them.  
Inspire them to seek other ways to advance their causes.  
We pray for ourselves,  
confessing our responsibility for acts of torture  
which violate our sisters and brothers  
and degrade us and our values.  
Guide us to pray and study,  
dialogue and speak,  
come together and advocate  
for an end to torture.  
We pray in the name of Jesus Christ,  
whose life, death, and resurrection  
reveals that your divine love  
is indeed stronger than torture and fear.  
Amen.

- **The Rev. W. Mark Koenig, coordinator, Presbyterian Peacemaking Program**

### ***A Reading Using Excerpts from Lamentations, Chapters 1 through 3***

#### **Reader 1:**

My eyes are spent with weeping, my stomach churns,  
My bile is poured out on the ground  
Because of the destruction of my people.

#### **Reader 2:**

Look, O Lord, and consider!  
The young and the old are lying on the ground in the streets;  
Our young men and young women have fallen by the sword.

#### **Reader 1:**

For these things we weep; our eyes flow with tears.  
Our elders sit in silence; our young bow their heads to the ground.  
We seek a comforter, one to revive our courage.

#### **Reader 2:**

Cry aloud to the Lord! Let tears stream down like a torrent.  
Arise, cry out in the night! Pour out your heart like water before the Lord!  
Lift up your hands to God, for the lives of your children!

#### **Reader 1:**

But call this to mind, and therefore have hope:

#### **Unison:**

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,  
God's mercies never come to an end;  
They are new every morning;  
Great is your faithfulness, O Lord!

- **The Rev. Dr. Diana C. Gibson, executive co-director, Council of Churches of Santa Clara County, California**

### ***A Lenten Prayer***

Holy God, can it really be Ash Wednesday again? It seems we just put away the last bits of Christmas—that little stuffed elf we found under Melissa's crib and those Christmas cards we piled into the big wooden salad bowl, promising ourselves to read them all slowly and properly once the holidays were over. Of course, we never did.

We just had enough time to break our New Year's resolutions, the silly public ones—our annual pledge to lose some pounds and finally organize the garage and, more importantly, the secret ones we made to you—to be better, to be more, to stay closer.

And suddenly, it's Ash Wednesday and Lent and all that talk about dust and death. All those reminders that we are but flesh and fragile and fleeting. Jesus' suffering. His suffering and the lashing and that crown of thorns.

Who could do such a thing to another person? Who could strike and strike again? Who could cut the tender flesh? Who could mean the pain? Jesus' suffering. His suffering and the blood and the pain.

But this year, Lent will be different. Because we know who could do such things. We could. We did. And all our horror at the photos and our choking tears and our prayers of confession and even our new hope for a new way of being cannot take back the lash or the blood or the pain. We have to live with that.

Forgive us. Amen.

- **The Rev. Grayson Van Camp, director of continuing education and alumni(ae) relations, McCormick Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois**

### ***A Prayer for Lent***

Father, creator of all universes, author of truth, justice, mercy, and liberty, according to laws you set in place, you spoke everything into creation and declared it to be good. From time out of mind, your human creation has violated your laws of love. We have sought to gain and keep for ourselves elements of creation entrusted to us as stewards of your earth. We have inflicted pain, suffering, and injustice upon our brothers and sisters—upon our neighbors. Make us realize that you take up the cause of the oppressed and afflicted—if we do injustice to them, we do it to you as well. We confess we have sinned against you and our neighbor by our greed, our selfishness, and, most of all, our pride.

We are often worse offenders than those we accuse. Thinking ourselves better and higher than the rest of creation, mistaking ourselves as better than our neighbors, we violate the laws of truth and justice you established throughout creation.

During this season of Lent, we ask your help to give up something we seem to hold all too dear: our addiction to violence, repression, and injustice. We come to you now to repent of our pride, our arrogance, and our false superiority. We pray for strength to give up these faults, not just during Lent, but forever. We humbly ask that you allow us to become instruments of your truth, justice, mercy, and liberty. We seek strength to strive against falsehoods that we parade as truth, crime that we masquerade as justice, self-serving false piety that we put on as mercy, and slavery that we try to pass off as liberty.

Great judge and ultimate definer of law, grant us mercy as we pledge to grant mercy to our neighbors. Place your great shield between our injustices and your creation, and help us seek and find not our faded and counterfeit imitation but the good creation that you made for us all. Amen.

- **John Cody Mosbey, instructor of criminal justice, Lees-McRae College, Banner Elk, North Carolina**

### ***An Easter Prayer and Meditation***

God of the Ages,  
This Easter day, we hold before us your only son,  
the risen Jesus Christ,  
who was betrayed by Judas, abandoned by his people, and  
surrendered to the power of Rome.

On whose brow a crown of thorns was pressed.

Scourged, he bore the weight of his cross to the hilltop.

In agony, his body suspended, pierced by nails, speared,  
a sop of vinegar thrust to his lips,  
then, from the depths of his suffering, he cried to you, his Father,  
“Forgive them!”

This day, we cry to you to forgive us for prisoners who, in our name, were delivered into the hands of torturers to suffer fear, pain, and death.

Free us of the spiritual blindness and sloth that left us  
silent and inert in the presence of that evil.

We renew our confession that you alone are Lord of the conscience. Illuminate our consciences, we pray. Grant us the wisdom and courage from this Easter day forth to be instruments of your peace, love, and justice in a broken and shattered world. Amen.

- **Robert H. Laws, elder, Calvary Presbyterian Church, San Francisco, California**

## ***Stations of the Cross: A Lenten Reflection***

As I think back on my experiences and understanding of Lent, I immediately think of my time in Catholic school. I am a Presbyterian by faith, but I attended a Catholic elementary school for nine years of my life. Every Friday of each Lenten season, my classmates and I left our classes to go to the church for the Stations of the Cross, which walked us step-by-step through Jesus' journey to his crucifixion and resurrection. The stations were usually led by an old priest with a nasally, droning voice that nearly put me to sleep every time. The only exception to this boring repetition was the last Friday before Easter, when the eighth-graders put on the living stations. As it was a reenactment, we voted for the person who would play each character. All of the girls wanted to be Mary because that meant that people thought you were pretty and popular. And Jesus was always the most attractive guy in the class. So, when I was in eighth grade, I was a bit disappointed when I was picked as a reader. I didn't get to sit, as Mary did, with a half-naked Jesus on my lap when he is taken down from the cross. Poor eighth-grade me.

This was my idea of Lent growing up: missing my last two periods of Friday class to go to Mass, where I would sit, stand, kneel, sing, respond, and repeat. It was a ritual of remembrance, yes, but a pretty clean version. I was mostly glad to go because it got me out of class, but the ritual meant very little to me.

I continued into high school and college with this disconnected relationship with Lent. Usually my focus was on the resurrection of Jesus on Easter Sunday, when I would get candy and see my friends and family.

In 2007, I went to El Salvador as part of my study abroad program. Before traveling there, torture was an abstract concept—something I had heard about but with which I never came into contact. But in El Salvador, I was bombarded with stories and images of massacres, rapes, and tortures. We learned about their twelve-year war between the right-wing government and the left-wing guerrillas, and the massacres at places like El Mozote and the assassinations of Archbishop Romero and other priests and nuns. I heard stories from people impacted by that time, and I witnessed their pain and suffering. Even hearing about those situations, I was able to think about torture in the abstract—as something happening to other people. It was something from which I could disconnect.

On a trip to La Universitaria Centroamericana, the site of the murder of six Jesuit priests and two servants, however, I had a harsh realization. We toured the campus, where students were milling about on their way to classes. Led into a tiny, unassuming chapel, our guide told us about the beautiful banner in the front with depictions of doves, peace, and hope. We found a memorial to Archbishop Romero at the side of the chapel, and we talked about the importance of remembering those whom we have lost. Then our guide told us to turn around and face the back of the chapel.

It is hard to describe how I felt at that moment. I remember being dumbfounded and saddened, sick to my stomach, wanting to cry, aching with pain. It is hard to express in words what I saw. On the back wall, on plain white canvas, hung twelve black and white drawings of naked, bound, whipped, stabbed, and tortured Salvadorans, meant to represent the Stations of the Cross.

I stood in shock.

The Stations of the Cross! The same stations that I sat through for countless hours during elementary school. The same stations that I complained about with my friends every Friday. The same stations that I was angry about because I didn't get to play Mary. The same stations that we glossed over in Sunday school before going on to talk about the resurrection on Easter Sunday.

The drawings showed the pain, anguish, and deprivation of tortured persons; the brutality that humanity can inflict on its own; and the recklessness with which we interact with divinely created life. They showed the power of hate, anger, and evil that exists in the world. Turning around from a banner of peace and hope to a red brick wall filled with images of brutal torture was a shock that did something to me, changed something in me.

In that contrast of hope and sorrow, I was shocked into an awareness of the reality of torture in our everyday lives and into the reality of what it must have been like for Jesus to hang on the cross for us, for our sin, for all of the wrong we have done to the world and to each other. The Stations of the Cross, the story of Jesus' crucifixion, has taken on an incredibly different meaning from my disconnected relationship of the past. I see now the pain and suffering of being whipped and tortured and made to carry a heavy cross over a long distance, being hung on a cross by your hands and feet, having a crown of thorns stuck onto your head, being stabbed in the side, and being surrounded by blood and

pain—all leading, I would have to think, to a sense of helplessness. Jesus died in that horrible manner so that we would not have to.

Linking those nameless people depicted in the chapel to the image and reality of Jesus Christ, I am forced to confront the harsh reality of torture in our society. There are still people who walk the way of the cross every day. People are still denied justice and dignity. People are still killed in massacres. People are still raped. People are still brutally murdered. People are still tortured. But the reality of torture shouldn't, and doesn't have to, exist. Jesus died on the cross—he was whipped, stabbed, bound, and tortured—so that we could be redeemed, so that we would not have to go through this pain and suffering. We must live out our faith in the power of the crucifixion and resurrection, sustained by the memory, hope, and presence of this tortured and risen Christ. And that means looking upon people as our brothers and sisters, regardless of our differences.

“We have a responsibility,” a Salvadoran woman told me, “to do justice through our words and actions, to those whose names we know and those we don't know.” Those nameless people on the wall of the chapel in El Salvador stick with me. In their pain and anguish, I am reminded of other anguished people who have suffered and are suffering from torture. But I am also reminded of how Christ came to redeem us from that reality. Wherever torture still occurs, we are not living out Christ's message of redeeming grace.

- **Elsbeth Pollack, senior at Beloit College in Beloit, Wisconsin, majoring in religious studies; member of Waverly Presbyterian Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania**

## For More Information

The Presbyterian Peacemaking Program ([www.pcusa.org/peacemaking](http://www.pcusa.org/peacemaking)) provides program information, and the Presbyterian Washington Office ([www.pcusa.org/washington](http://www.pcusa.org/washington)) provides advocacy updates.

No2Torture ([www.no2torture.org](http://www.no2torture.org)) is a grassroots movement that launched in 2005 from within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). It provides background, resources, and networking opportunities. Sign up to be a part of a moderated Web-based conversation and receive updates.

The National Religious Campaign Against Torture ([www.nrcat.org](http://www.nrcat.org)) is a coalition of more than 300 faith-based groups across the theological and political spectrum united in saying “Torture is a Moral Issue.” The NRCAT Action Fund provides specifics on political advocacy ([www.nrcatactionfund.org](http://www.nrcatactionfund.org)).

The Center for Victims of Torture ([www.cvt.org](http://www.cvt.org)) provides information about how to help healing. The center is in touch with groups around the country who provide similar services. They also network with others groups to prevent future abuse.

Human Rights First ([www.humanrightsfirst.org](http://www.humanrightsfirst.org)) has built a diverse coalition that includes many members of the military community in advocating for humane and effective interrogation practices.

Amnesty International ([www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org)) is one of the oldest and most effective groups opposing torture around the world.

The Center for Constitutional Rights ([www.ccrjustice.org](http://www.ccrjustice.org)) provides current and detailed information about the legal issues involved in torture.

The Torture Abolition and Survivors Coalition ([www.tassc.org](http://www.tassc.org)) provides opportunities for direct action, education, and networking.

## Print Resources

*Resolution Against Torture*, including the “Resolution on Human Rights in a Time of Terrorism and Torture” and the overture from the Presbytery of San Francisco on “Petitions Against Torture,” approved by the 217th General Assembly (2006) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Louisville: Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy, 2006. Call (800) 524-2612 to order PDS #68-600-06-002. The cost is \$3.00 plus shipping and handling.

*Torture is a Moral Issue: Christians, Jews, Muslims and People of Faith Speak Out*, edited by George Hunsinger. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008.

*Torture: Religious Ethics and National Security*, by John Perry, S.J. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2005.

*The Dark Side: The Inside Story of the War on Terror Turned into the War on American Ideals*, by Jane Mayer. New York: Doubleday, 2008.

*Torture and Democracy*, by Darius Rejali. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.

“The Red Cross Torture Report and What It Means,” by Mark Danner. *New York Review of Books*, April 4, 2009.

## **Acknowledgments**

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