

House Judiciary Committee
February 15, 2024
House Bill 2782
Testimony of Sister Annie Loendorf
Opposed

Chairperson Humphries and Members of the Committee:

My name is Annie Loendorf. I have been a Sister of Charity of Leavenworth for 58 years. I have been in pastoral ministry in Kansas City, Missouri for 43 years. I have been spiritual life companions with those of different faith backgrounds, women in domestic violence shelters, victims of sexual assault, and those in drug and alcohol recovery. I give this testimony today in opposition to H.B. 2782 in my personal capacity, and I strongly urge the Committee to reject this bill.

Since 2021, I have had the blessing to serve as the Spiritual Life Companion for a man charged with Capital Murder in Kansas. We talk, we learn about the Scripture together, and we pray. We laugh, we cry. We celebrate and commiserate. I have grown to know and love this man. He is accused of a terrible crime, but he is more than his worst mistake, and I see a human being and child of God.

I remember when the prosecution announced its intent to seek the death penalty. Since then, I have watched this man bear the burden of living under a death threat from his government. I see the horrific toll that it takes on him. Even when he does not admit it, there is a crushing weight that comes from knowing that his government wants 12 of his peers to end his life. I have also become close with his family, and their heartbreak is tremendous. They go through their lives, always with the shadow over them that their loved one – their son, their brother, their father – has been marked for the ultimate condemnation.

This man is not my first ministry to someone facing execution. I companioned Lisa Montgomery, a federal death row prisoner, in writing a few months before her execution. She was executed after a long, horrendous night where the hour of her death was continually moved and shuffled. This was my first experience being personally attentive to and affected by the death penalty.

For my current spiritual companion, I now think about this man and the utter horror of what unfolded in Alabama. His personal grief will only be compounded. His family's trauma will only deepen. I see only building pressure and sorrow that may become too much for him to bear as he continues to work with his legal team. The death penalty is fundamentally cruel. It exacts a specific and unique human tragedy when it is at issue in a case, and the use of suffocation will only worsen the fundamental problem with capital punishment. I have no doubt too that the horror of this dangerous execution method will only compound the suffering of victims, families, and all the court, police, and prison actors in this process.

We killed Kenny Smith in Alabama on January 25, 2024. I say 'we' because all of us bear a moral and ethical responsibility for that killing. Our nation too often lacks a fundamental respect for human life and human dignity, but I believe in our redemption and ability to become a better version of ourselves. In moments like this, we can do the right thing by turning away from anger and showing compassion.

Christians began the Holy Season of Lent yesterday. I now share the words of Joan Chittister, a nun of the Order of St. Benedictine, for our collective reflection:

[The prophet] Joel says instead, 'rend your hearts and not your clothing.' Lent is a call to weep for what we could have been and are not. Lent is the grace to grieve for what we should have done and did not. Lent is the opportunity to change what we ought to change but have not. Lent is not about penance. Lent is about becoming, doing and changing whatever it is that is blocking the fullness of life in us right now. Lent is a summons to live anew.

I am asking with all my heart that you reject this bill and join me in opposition. You are all in my prayers. Thank you for your time and consideration.

With love,

Sr. Annie Loendorf
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