

Minutes of the St. Thomas Aquinas Human Concerns Committee Meeting -- May 22, 2012

Attendance:

Paul Chestnut, Laura Chiu, Terry McCaffrey, Terry Atkinson, George Chippendale, Ruth Chippendale, Mary Fong

1. Faith-Sharing/Question of the Week

OLD BUSINESS

2. Approval of April minutes

3. Our Congolese Refugees

We had agreed that our committee should gradually withdraw from this project because the family is nearing self-sufficiency. As a way to ease out, we will have a picnic. We discussed a date. We decided on Saturday, May 26. We discussed a place. OLR was suggested, but transportation for the family will be a problem. They have three cars, but gas cost is a consideration. There are parks in south San Jose. Claire Collins, who lives in the area, said that she will check out the local parks.

4. Death Penalty issues - Terry

We are looking forward to November 6, the day that the SAFE Initiative will be up for a vote. The strategy was outlined by Terry McCaffrey, the President of California People of Faith Working Against the Death Penalty:

- 1 Gain endorsements
- 2 Hold House Parties
- 3 Fundraise: \$6 million target

Issues that will resonate with voters are: Cost savings brought about by the policy, Safety - money devoted to solving crimes, and the innocence of death penalty victims

Terry is rounding up endorsements. We filled out the endorsement form, so HCC has officially endorsed the initiative. Laura will try to get the parish to endorse the petition by bringing it up at the next PSC meeting. There will be house parties to get publicity and to raise money. There will be three house parties at venues in our area including Channing House and First Presbyterian Church.

5. June is Torture Awareness Month

Paul described the various events that the National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT) is sponsoring in the month of June, which is Torture Awareness Month. NRCAT is a growing membership organization committed to ending U.S.-sponsored torture. In particular, prolonged solitary confinement is a form of torture that is very common in our prison system; it is an extreme form of punishment that is known to cause physiological and psychological harm. NRCAT is gathering endorsements of the following statement from people of faith all across the country. When they reach 500 endorsers from a particular state, they will send this statement, along with the list of those endorsers, to that state's governor and top corrections official, along with every member of that state's legislature. If they subsequently reach 1000 endorsers in the state, they will send the

list again – and so on. In this way, they hope to help strengthen efforts in each state to bring an end to the use of prolonged solitary confinement. We discussed the possibility of starting a drive to get the people of the parish to sign on to this statement:

Recognizing that prolonged solitary confinement can cause serious harm to prisoners, it has long been considered a form of torture. As a person of faith, I oppose the use of prolonged solitary confinement.

Experts estimate that tens of thousands of prisoners in the U.S. criminal justice system are currently being held in solitary confinement. The vast majority of these inmates are detained in state prison facilities. Prisoners held in solitary confinement are often detained in a cell by themselves for 23 hours a day. Some prisoners are kept in these conditions for months, years, or even decades. Medical experts have stated that prisoners held in isolation for extended periods experience symptoms akin to delirium, and the impact on mentally ill prisoners is especially damaging. Alarming, these prisoners are sometimes released from solitary confinement units directly to their communities when they complete their prison sentence.

We need to invest in humane alternatives that address the mental health needs of prisoners in a way that effectively contributes both to their rehabilitation and to their successful transition back into society. Because holding prisoners in solitary confinement units is significantly more expensive than keeping them in the general prison population, instituting humane alternatives makes sense, both financially and morally.

We must end the use of prolonged solitary confinement in all 50 states and the federal prison system. It is costly, inhumane and ineffective; it harms prisoners and our communities. I call upon state legislators and departments of corrections to begin now to take steps to end prolonged solitary confinement.

One suggested approach is to produce an insert to the bulletin urging people to sign up on the web site. Alternatively, we could solicit signatures and pass them on to NRCAT.

Paul agreed to write an insert and contact Father Matt about it.

Paul brought a DVD containing the film *Solitary Confinement: Torture in Your Backyard* created by NRCAT. It is a film that discusses solitary confinement by interviews with knowledgeable individuals. It is emphasized that prolonged solitary confinement is recognized as a true form of torture because of how it affects the human psyche. It is a form of torture that is very common in our prison system.

## NEW BUSINESS

### 6. Soles4Souls

Soles4Souls® is a shoe charity that collects gently worn shoes and monies to provide shoes to those in need. Terry Atkinson proposes that our committee carry out a drive to collect shoes and pass them on to Soles4Souls. She was prepared with a flyer describing the procedure. The steps are:

- ◆ Register with Soles4Souls and receive their collection boxes
- ◆ Place notices in bulletins two weeks prior to drive

- ◆ On collection day, bind pairs tightly together
- ◆ Record number of pairs in each box
- ◆ Take shoes to commercial business site for shipping

We decided to aim for September for this drive.

#### 7. November Ballot Issues

We discussed presenting a forum on ballot issues in October. We will contact the League of Women Voters regarding speakers for all ballot issues. We will consider ways to work on helping the SAFE initiative win.

#### 8. Human Trafficking

Human trafficking is the illegal trade of human beings for the purposes of reproductive slavery, commercial sexual exploitation, forced labor, or a modern-day form of slavery. The diocesan web site has a Human Trafficking Awareness Group (<http://www.dsj.org/ministries/social-ministries/global-solidarity/human-trafficking>). Janet Ferree is the leader. Paul will contact Janet for tips on how we can support awareness in our parish.

#### 9. What's On Your Mind?

George spoke about South Bay Sanctuary. There is an event scheduled for Sunday, October 21. He will reserve a room at St. Albert.

George said that PIA had a meeting with the Palo Alto police chief regarding the requirement to send fingerprints of arrestees to ICE. The chief said that the police department does not send fingerprints to ICE.

Terry Atkinson discussed the Monday night meal at St. Francis. At one time St. Vincent dePaul sponsored this event, but they did not have the funds to continue. The Kiwanis Club picked it up in October. They need support to continue in the form of money or food. Would the parish consider contributing?

Paul wrote an appeal for new members which appeared in the bulletin on April 29. We received no response.

#### 10. Volunteer for Faith-sharing/Question of the Week

Next meeting - July 26, 2012