

## INTERNATIONAL DAY IN SUPPORT OF SURVIVORS OF TORTURE

### INTRODCUTION

*The international community marks 26 June as the International Day in Support of Survivors of Torture. On this day in 1987 the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment entered into force.*

Article 1 of the Convention defines torture as:  
“... any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity. It does not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in or incidental to lawful sanctions.”

In recent years some people have sought to argue that the use of such methods may be justified in the struggle against international terrorism. Catholic teaching on human dignity affirms that torture can never be justified.

These notes are intended to encourage Catholic parishes and schools to find out more about torture, to support survivors of torture and trauma, and to promote the Church's teaching more effectively.

### CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

Catholic teaching concerning the dignity of the human person leads us to an unambiguous stand against torture. To use the principle of the common good to argue in favour of allowing people to be tortured in order to achieve some greater good is to misunderstand the nature of the common good. The common good cannot be served by using people as instruments and abusing their human dignity.

To find out more about international Catholic teaching concerning torture, we can turn to the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

### COMPENDIUM OF THE SOCIAL DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH

*Paragraph 404 of the Compendium summarizes the Church's stance against the use of torture.*

It concludes that:

“International juridical instruments concerning human rights correctly indicate a prohibition against torture as a principle which cannot be contravened under any circumstances”.

### CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

*Paragraphs n 2266 and 2267 of the Catechism affirm that the state has a duty to safeguard the common good and must curb behaviour that harms the rights of others.*

Punishment should seek to put right harm done, and to correct offenders. However the means used to defend the common good and to punish offenders must always respect human dignity – including the human dignity of offenders.

Turning to the teachings of our own local Bishops in Australia, we can reflect on the Pastoral Letter issued by Bishop Morris in 2001 for the International Day in Support of Survivors of Torture.

## ACT TO STOP TORTURE

*Bishop William Morris, who was then the Acting Chair of the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, noted that:*

“Torture is surprisingly widespread even today. It happens all around the world, including our region. There are many survivors of torture among us who have come to Australia seeking asylum, safety and a chance to rebuild their lives. Perhaps we are unaware of their presence among us. Often they are traumatised again by recounting their experiences and prefer not to talk about it.

Many survivors of torture have physical as well as psychological scars and on-going health problems, but there are not always visible signs of torture. Some of the more discreet methods of torture, which do not leave any tell tale marks, include isolation, the manipulation of light, physiological rhythms, emotions and senses, and the administration of drugs.”

Torture treats the victim as something less than human, and in the process the perpetrator becomes less human.

The full text of the letter is available at [http://www.socialjustice.catholic.org.au/Content/pdf/support\\_survivors\\_of\\_torture.pdf](http://www.socialjustice.catholic.org.au/Content/pdf/support_survivors_of_torture.pdf)

Extracts from these international and local teachings could be used for personal reflection or as discussion starters for small groups or classes.

### TOOLS FOR ACTION

There are many campaigns against torture in which individuals and small groups can participate.

#### *World Organisation Against Torture*

To join the World Organisation Against Torture’s action campaigns, visit <http://www.omct.org/index.php?id=APP&lang=eng> for more information.

#### *International Federation for Action by Christians for the Abolition of Torture (FIACAT)*

FIACAT raises awareness in the Churches and amongst Christians of the existence of torture and the need, for reasons of Christian faith, to work towards its abolition.

One particular action FIACAT encourages is the writing of letters to the political leaders of countries in which torture is practised. For background information and action materials visit <http://ns3810.ovh.net/~fiacat/en/spip.php?rubrique8>

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

You can use the following links to access information about ways in which the United Nations has sought to combat torture.

### *Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment*

The full text of the treaty is available at

[http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/h\\_cat39.htm](http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/h_cat39.htm)

The text of the Optional Protocol to the Convention is available at

<http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu2/6/cat/treaties/opcat.htm>

### *United Nations Fact Sheet on Combating Torture*

This 51 page document sets out the various international instruments for combating torture. It can be downloaded from

<http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu6/2/fs4rev1.pdf>

### SERVICES FOR SURVIVORS OF TRAUMA & TORTURE IN AUSTRALIA

#### Australian Capital Territory

Companion House  
info@companionhouse.org.au Tel 02 6247 7227

#### New South Wales

Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS)  
www.startts.org/ Tel 02 9794 1900

#### Northern Territory

Torture and Trauma Survivors Service of the Northern Territory (TTSSNT)  
admin@melaleuca.org.au Tel 08 8985 3311

#### Queensland

Queensland Program of Assistance to Survivors of Torture and Trauma (QPASTT)  
www.qpastt.org.au/ Tel 07 3391 6677

#### South Australia

Survivors of Torture and Trauma Assistance and Rehabilitation Service (STTARS)  
www.sttars.org.au/ Tel 08 8346 5433

#### Tasmania

Phoenix Support Service for Survivors of Torture and Trauma  
phoenix@mrchobart.org.au Tel 03 6234 9330

#### Victoria

Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture (VFST)  
www.foundationhouse.org.au/ Tel 03 9388 0022

#### Western Australia

Association of Services to Torture and Trauma Survivors (ASeTTTS)  
www.asetts.org.au/ Tel 08 9325 6272