

Religious leaders conflicted on Tsarnaev death penalty

Some say justice, mercy at odds in sentencing

By Jan Ransom and Jacqueline Tempera Globe Staff and Globe Correspondent, May 18, 2015, 12:00 a.m.



The Rev. Gustavo Miracle of St. Angela Merici Parish in Mattapan said Sunday he did not support the death penalty for Tsarnaev. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

They are torn.

The congregation at St. Ann Church where the family of Martin Richard attends Mass is struggling with a federal jury's decision Friday to sentence Marathon bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev to death.

“You don’t want to see another life gone, but when you know the family, you’re sad,” said Kathy Costello, 54, a member of the Dorchester church and a teacher at Pope John Paul II Catholic Academy, where Martin went to school.

The video showed he placed the bomb very close to the Richard family, she noted. “We’re torn.”

A similar sentiment was expressed in Greater Boston’s churches, mosques, and temples Sunday as religious leaders and congregants largely condemned the sentence.

“As a priest, as a Christian, I cannot support that,” said the Rev. Gustave Miracle, associate pastor at the St. Angela Merici Church in Mattapan. “I understand those who think if he’s put to death, there are wounds that can be healed. [But] I think a long life in prison would be a solution.”

The jury’s decision to give 21-year-old Tsarnaev the stiffest form of justice for his role in the Marathon bombings followed polls that showed the state and city were mostly against the death penalty.

Miracle said the sentence has surprised him. Society would be better off to keep him alive, he said, and perhaps learn why Tsarnaev decided to detonate one of the two bombs that left three dead and hundreds wounded on April 15, 2013.

Not everyone who gathered outside the Catholic Church on the corner of Blue Hill Avenue and Fremont Street Sunday afternoon agreed, however.

Gerda Audry, 49, of Dorchester said she was troubled by the verdict, but the sentence fits the crime.

“It’s so sad. He’s so young and he openly understands what he was doing and he knew the end product it would have on the world,” she said. “It’s so difficult to think you’re accepting that kind of punishment.”

It was the severity of the crime that caused some churchgoers, such as Audry, to support the ultimate sentence for the homegrown terrorist. The weeks of grueling testimony in which family and friends of bombing victims described a bloody scene on Boylston Street, scattered limbs, and spectators blown to pieces undoubtedly influenced many people.

Videos showed Tsarnaev standing behind the Richard family just moments before the bomb went off, leaving 8-year-old Martin dead and his sister, Jane, without a leg. Also killed in the blasts were 23-year-old Lingzi Lu, a Boston University graduate student from China, and Krystle Marie Campbell, a 29-year-old from Arlington.

Tsarnaev, who appeared unremorseful during the three-month trial, was convicted last month in the Marathon bombings and sentenced Friday to death by a unanimous vote of the same jury.

The Catholic Church has long opposed the death penalty.

“We believe that society can do better than the death penalty,” the Catholic Bishops of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts said in a statement released in April. “As the Bishops of the United States said in their 2005 statement, ‘A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death,’ no matter how heinous the crime, if society can protect itself without ending a human life, it should do so.’

“We believe these words remain true today in the face of this most terrible crime,” the bishops said.

But some leaders of other faiths said in interviews Sunday that Tsarnaev’s sentence is appropriate.

“The Holy Book says if you kill one human being, it’s like killing an entire humanity,” said Malik Khan, former president of the Islamic Center of Boston, Wayland. “You’re

allowed to fight when attacked, but to take an innocent life is not justified.”

His two daughters had been spectators at the Marathon that day, he said, and anyone could have been a victim.

“Criminal law allows for the death penalty for several crimes,” he said. “If you take someone’s life, you get the same punishment.”

The Islamic community has not taken a stand on the death penalty largely because feelings differ widely on the issue, said Yusufi Vali, the executive director of the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center.

Vali did not say whether he believes in the death penalty but said he and members of his mosque support the jury.

“People have been hopeful and prayerful that this brings some sense of calm to those who suffered in the attack,” Vali said. “What these guys did was totally antithetical to what Islam is all about.”

Rabbi Andrew Vogel said he briefly discussed the verdict with congregants Friday night at Temple Sinai in Brookline.

“It’s very clear that what the Tsarnaev brothers did was premeditated and there is not a lot of remorse,” he said in a phone interview Sunday. “Remorse must be a part of the equation in forgiveness.”

But Vogel said he does not believe in the death penalty, even in this case.

“There is a certain sanctity to life that we should not violate, even in extraordinary circumstances,” he said.

Lead pastor David Swaim of the High Rock Church in Arlington, an evangelical covenant congregation, said his church does not have an official stance on the death penalty, but as a Christian, he is grappling with the decision and feels very conflicted.

“With the death penalty, you see a clash of two of our deeply held values, justice and mercy,” he said in a phone interview. “Because [Tsarnaev] has taken lives, there is a sense that this will bring justice. Collectively, Christians are empowered to execute justice on His behalf. The real question is this time, should we exercise mercy or justice on God’s behalf?”

In Roxbury, the Twelfth Baptist Church fell quiet as the Rev. Arthur T. Gerald Jr. encouraged forgiveness for Tsarnaev during the Sunday morning service.

“Vengeance is not ours,” he told the congregation. “We preach forgiveness and resurrection. We are here to save souls. No matter what you’ve done, there is always forgiveness under Jesus Christ.”

A roar of applause followed his remarks.

The Boston Marathon Bombing Trial

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Dzhokhar Tsarnaev apologizes for suffering caused by Marathon bombing



A somber, soft-spoken Boston Marathon bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev confessed his horrific crimes and apologized Wednesday at his sentencing hearing for the April 2013 terror attack that killed three people and wounded more than 260 others. “I am sorry for the lives I have taken, for the suffering I have caused, and for the terrible damage I have done,” said Tsarnaev, who was sentenced to death. [READ FULL STORY →](#)

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