The sixth commandment: Thou shall not kill

Christians, Jews, and Muslims all share the belief that 3,472 years ago, Moses climbed to the top of Mount Sinai and received the ten commandments from God. As a Catholic child, I attended Catechism, and I was made to memorize these commandments and I generally practice these directives to this day. However, when driving on the Mass Pike, I am likely to take the name of the lord in vein.

I was taught that commandment number six, “Thou shall not kill” is the most important one. I repeatedly asked my mother how it was that my dad fought in the war but was also a Christian? And how could there be ministers who were willing to be part of the military? Of course she explained about politics, governments and war. She said there were really bad people who must be killed in order to protect us.

My father was a Master Sargent in the Army Air Core in WW2. He was a Navigator on a bomber in the “Pacific Theater” as it was called. Although he was proud of his service, he was haunted with repeated dreams, particularly of one incident. He had been in a plane that went down in Japan. It landed safely in the jungle but the crew of three needed to wait for a part to be air dropped to them the next day. That night they slept in individual tents and he was startled awake by a Japanese soldier crawling over him bearing a large knife. My father was able to fight him off and then killed the man with that knife. My mother explained to me that killing people from a distance with bombs effected my father far less than this one, hand-to-hand combat situation. In fact, she was certain that his PTSD (as this condition was named decades later) was the main factor that led to his untimely death of a massive heart attack at the age of 40. Leaving my mother a widow at the age of 34, my brother 9, my sister 8, and I was 3.

My father was lauded as a hero and was decorated for flying several missions and saving other men. But I think in his conscience, he considered himself a sinner, even though he had been in a “Kill or be killed” situation.

Our legal system has levels of killing. Pre-meditated murder is a far more serious offence than a crime of passion or self-defense. Pre-meditated is also called murder in the first-degree because planning had taken place. Then there is Second degree murder which is intentional but not planned, such as a fist fight that escalates. Next there is voluntary manslaughter which occurs under extreme provocation such as coming home to find a rapist attacking your daughter. I'm sure that any of us might be capable of such a crime in this type of scenario. Last is involuntary manslaughter such as backing your car into someone that you did not see. I feel very sorry for those who have accidently committed such a crime.

So following these definitions, and because God told us that "Thou shall not kill" and because it is pre-meditated, I believe that the death penalty is murder in the first degree.

Most executions in the US are performed with lethal injection, but due to botched executions and drug shortages, some inmates are killed by nitrogen gas. Inmate Kenneth Smith, who survived the state of Alabama's previous attempt to put him to death by lethal injection in 2022 was killed by nitrogen gas in 2024. It is the first new method of execution since lethal injection was introduced in 1982. Witnesses reported that the mask was put over his face and he held his breath for a long time before apparently convulsing and pulling against the restraints for at least two minutes, with his eyes rolling back into his head. Then, Smith breathed deeply for several minutes, vomited into his mask and then choked to death.

I learned of this execution in horror last year while I was making dinner and listening to news on the radio. I froze in my kitchen and was immediately taken back to a situation that I endured ten years earlier. I had been flying in a small plane of around 24 passengers from Panama to Ecuador for my inspection work on organic banana plantations. I am not a person who ever sleeps in public but I became extremely tired, in fact I felt woozy and started to get a bad headache when a woman behind me screamed and I realized that something was terribly wrong. The oxygen masks dropped down from above us

and I reached out and eagerly put it on. A recorded voice with instructions came over the intercom first in Spanish, then English telling us not to worry, but we had lost cabin pressure. The Captain also spoke over the intercom to reassure us.

I realized with horror that my life and the lives of all of those around me were completely dependent on these masks and the hidden oxygen tanks above us which could also fail. I began to feel panic rising inside of me. I was tethered to a mask for survival, I could not live if I took it off, I could not drink water or go to the bathroom. I needed to calm down. With my foot I was able to reach the strap of my backpack that was under the seat in front of me. I pulled it toward me and took out a small rosary that I always carried in my backpack. My niece had given this rosery to me to carry on my travels. I had not said the rosary in decades, but I began to pray with them and the handling of these beads was very soothing and I was able to calm down. Fortunately, it was only around 20 minutes until we landed.

So here I was a decade later, standing in my kitchen, learning of the death of Kenneth Smith when I was transported back to the fear and anxiety I had, wearing my oxygen mask which was intentionally designed to keep people alive, while Mr. Smith's was designed to kill. I wonder if the company that makes masks to save people on airplanes also manufactures the ones designed to kill people?

I contend that anyone involved in the manufacturing of instruments of death is as much of a sinner as the one who puts the mask on the face of a constrained prisoner. And, just as I was taught as a child, intentional killing of any kind is a sin. Twenty three states have banned capital punishment, including Massachusetts, which means that twenty seven states still allow it. And just this week, Idaho has reinstituted firing squads. Meanwhile, world-wide about 75% of countries have abolished the death penalty.

How can we call ourselves children of God unless we stop this barbaric practice? And above all else, we must work harder to make peace in the world.

Amen