

Plus Ça Change

If I live much longer, I could be one of the few people who can remember receiving corporal punishment at school. In the 1950s I'd been disruptive at school; so the teacher gave me three strokes of the cane across my rear end. But don't worry, I'm not appealing for the return of corporal punishment. Instead, I am suggesting that, like the death penalty, corporal punishment has not really been abolished.

'Not really been abolished'? Hasn't progress meant that flogging and hanging have gone into the Dustbin of History? Well, no. I believe that they are still inflicted by our society, but in different ways. Violent criminals are now physically overpowered and, if necessary, forcefully drugged. That's not so different from receiving the violence of corporal punishment. Those with murder in mind can be shot down in the street by armed police; rather than being hung in a prison. When counselling and negotiation fail, the ultimate violent and death-bearing weapons of society are still being exercised in one form or another.

That is why I think that neither those who want to 'Flog 'Em and Hang 'Em High', nor those who want even more Civil Rights legislation and meaningful counselling, have the answer. As the Frenchman Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr said about abolishing the death penalty: 'Let the gentlemen who do the murders take the first step'. And as to the idea that the removal of corporal punishment decreases violence; as Karr also said: 'The more it changes, the more it's the same thing'. (Usually translated as: 'Plus Ça Change').

Yes, I have mixed feelings about corporal punishment, and I don't want human beings hanging at the end of a rope like carcasses in an abattoir. But we can't pretend that today's methods have solved the problems that the old ways were designed to address: whether they are school discipline or murder.

Sin cannot be abolished by passing laws. It is an infection which only God can cure. Separating ourselves from him, is like refusing to go to the doctor when we have a deadly disease. That is why the Church, her sacraments and her services; should be a hospital for our broken spirits, and not a Sunday social club.

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