

Rochester Catholic and Episcopal Bishops Issue Joint Pastoral Letter on Attica

My Dear People:

In these last ten days the minds and hearts of all of us have been moved by the anger, the shock, the fading hope and tragic destruction of human life at Attica. It is with sadness at our own past neglect that we address this pastoral letter to you. The anguish and death that stand as the result of this experience have finally forced us as pastors of a Christian people to speak out on our penal system in this state. For years many, including ourselves, have been blind to the full dimensions of the problems in our system of justice — or we have been unwilling to face them. Now, we can no longer avoid challenging these conditions.

We wish to convey our profound grief and offer our aroused sympathies to the families who have lost a man they love. Waiting in the long silence, the families of both inmates and hostages have had to bear a heavy burden, with all too many finally having their worst fears confirmed. The weight of public discussion that must follow this holocaust will fall heavily on all involved as an added burden, particularly on Governor Rockefeller, inmates, Commissioner Oswald and guards.

How can anyone understand this terrible destruction of life? The inmates in the face of callous indifference were desperately and fearfully trying to express their human dignity. On the other hand, the prison staff was desperately and fearfully struggling to maintain order. Acting under great pressure and under burden of concern for their colleagues' lives, they responded as they felt they must. Tragically, there seemed to be no way to satisfy the requirements of both human dignity and order. At the horrible expense of many lives, only a tenuous order was restored.

It took this tragedy to force us to speak. How stiffnecked and hard of heart we have become. When a tragedy like Attica is required to alert us to the inhumane conditions in our society, the Church is indeed asleep. Must it always be shock and horror which awaken us to the respect for human dignity that God in Christ calls us to affirm?

We have been too busy about other matters — too busy to speak up again and again with the voice of Christ, insisting on the basic respect for all men that must be the bedrock of a humane system of justice. Ideally, our institutions are to be responsive to all segments of our society, but in reality this is not the case. Too often our institutions, our laws, our commitments have been to protect the comfort of those who are already comfortable, at the expense of the poor and oppressed among us. And in the wake of this comfortableness has come the tragedy now expressed at Attica where both prisoners and guards have become victims.

How, for example, can we justify cuts in the State's budget which leave only 70¢ a day to feed a prisoner? The lack of money has been given as the primary reason for delaying reform. Must we always save money at the expense of those who are least able to have their needs heard and their humanity valued? What does it say of our State that among the first of budget cuts are the appropriations for prisoners and the mentally ill?



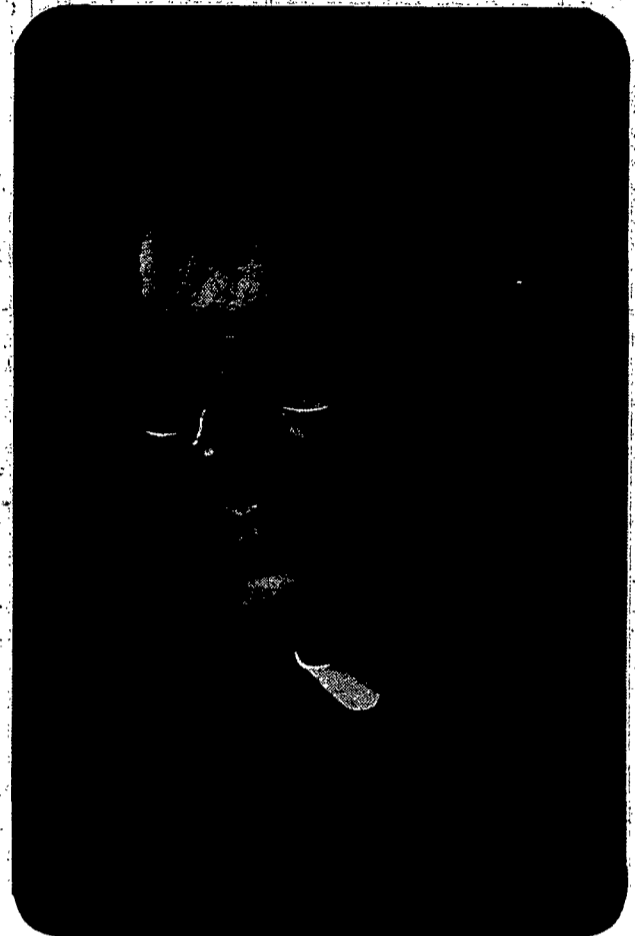
Bishop Hogan

Surely there must be order within a penal institution, as in all our institutions. But this order must always be directed toward rehabilitation, which demands that the humanity of a person be not only respected but nurtured and encouraged.

The roots of the chaos in our penal system lie buried deep within our society itself. Shouting and anger, terror and fear, accusations and polarization surround us. For those who follow Christ, human dignity and mutual respect cannot become the casualties of our emotions in this event. We need to be a people who in our faithfulness are ready to pray, to confess, to forgive, to seek justice now. We need to be a people whose very lives are a sign of good news to the poor and of freedom to the oppressed.

And now, in this day, we quite clearly need to be a people who will sustain a strong effort to insure a system of justice which will respect and encourage the full humanity of each man and woman. There are unwelcome truths to hear and hard inequities to correct. All of us will be changed in bringing a fuller justice and a humanity to our prisons. Speaking to you as pastors, we welcome this. For, in the extreme seriousness of such an effort, we can perhaps know again what it is to be brothers and sisters to all men and women.

In the light of Attica, we pledge that we will ask the Church to reassess its priorities. Each of us will strive to make tangible com-



Bishop Spears

mitments to participate in the painstaking efforts necessary to reform the penal system.

Immediately, we urge that:

1. The 28 points agreed upon by prisoners and officials alike, be implemented.
2. The negotiations commission active in the crisis be continued and allowed to enter the prison as full participants in the investigation.
3. The State establish at once impartial channels in all of our prisons which will make it possible for human needs to be heard publicly without the background screams of dying men.

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Episcopal Bishop of Rochester

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Clergy Changes

The Pastoral Office has announced several clergy appointments, including the naming of three new pastors. Page 2A.