

Speakers Day:

Criminals' Lives Also Deserve Respect

By **MARTIN TOOMBS**
Southern Tier Editor

Elmira—Speakers at the third "Respect Life Seminar" at St. Joseph's Hospital Oct. 16 emphasized the need for the public to respect the lives of criminals.

Two speakers spoke on imprisonment, and two on capital punishment as part of the series of seminars dealing with life issues.

Sister Margaret Mary Flynn, who works in the Chemung County Jail, emphasized the difference between the county jail and the state prison, and described life in the jail.

She pointed out that 60 percent of those in the county jail have not been convicted, and are there because they can't afford bail.

She challenged the 22 persons attending the seminar to tour the jail, noting that "you can go down at any time to tour that jail."

A majority of the inmates are "male, poor, have no jobs" and little education, she noted, and most come from broken homes.

One point she related to illustrate the difficulties concerned personal hygiene. Until recently, inmates were not issued a toothbrush and toothpaste, she noted, which meant that some inmates did not have those items for their entire imprisonment, as much as a year. After a long fight, she reported, they are now included in standard issue.

Sister emphasized that she is not saying that the inmates have done nothing wrong, but that "crimes are being committed down there too," against the inmates. State law requires physicals when a person enters an institution, she noted, but inmates in the county jail don't receive one. She also mentioned other difficulties inmates have had in getting medical care.

She also described the 5-foot by 8-foot cells, connected by a 3-foot walkway, commenting that "just the noise" in the cellblocks is "dehumanizing."

The problem, she stated, is that "citizens in this community, I feel, really don't want to know about this."

"I'm not condoning crime," she continued, "but I don't think we should strip a person of dignity and personhood."

Father Daniel Tormey, chaplain at the Elmira

Correctional Facility and Reception Center, showed pictures of inmates in the state prison to reinforce his concern that the inmates be regarded as persons, and not forgotten in a discussion of theories. The pictures help reduce "all these questions that we're talking about from vague generalities to people," he said.

The subject of life in prison "is so complex," he noted; "the questions and problems are very evident. It's the solutions that are hard to come by."

He called for two issues to be dealt with. "That which makes a Hell out of prison has to be addressed," he said, and the factors which result in persons becoming criminals.

He noted his agreement with Sister Margaret Mary that prisons are as they are because people don't know or don't care about the situation. "Our society at large is content" to do nothing, he commented.

As for recently-voiced concern over crime victims, Father Tormey questioned why it has taken so long. He added that he thinks it's because society doesn't want to deal with even the crime victims.

Father Tormey noted that most inmates someday will be released, and if for no other reason, that is why the public should be concerned with how inmates are treated.

Rev. Greg Jackson, pastor of Monumental Baptist Church, made several points critical of the death penalty, noting that his evaluation of research indicates that "the death penalty does not in effect deter crime."

He emphasized his belief that "two wrongs do not make a right," and that it is just as wrong for the government to kill as it was for convicted murderer.

He also commented that as a Christian "I believe in the possibility of redemption, change," and capital punishment eliminates that hope.

He also noted that the "death penalty is a privilege of the poor," challenging the audience to name a wealthy person who has been executed in this country.

Father William Spilly, Office of Human Development staffperson based in Wayne County, chose to argue from a moral ground, based on the New Testament

and the traditions of the Catholic Church.

He noted that studies on deterrence and other issues are inconclusive, and that looking for a moral determination is more absolute.

He reported that Church teachings on punishment always call for two purposes: vindictive and medicinal. As capital punishment is only vindictive, he noted, it doesn't fit the model.

The Church's teaching has long been, he said, that "no one is so hopeless that their life has to be taken."

He also reported that in 1974, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a one-line statement in opposition to capital punishment, and followed it up later with an explained statement.

He also noted that "L'Osservatore Romano," the Vatican newspaper, recently criticized capital punishment.

Father Spilly concluded by calling on Church people to be concerned with euthanasia, abortion, capital punishment, "or any other thing that demeans human life."

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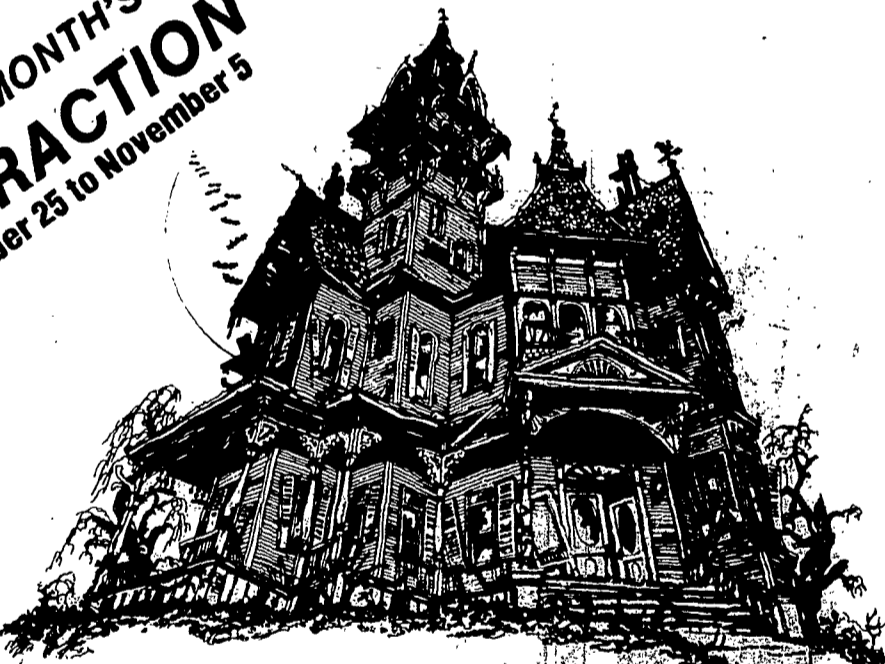
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- Member, County Legislature's Committee on Human Services
- Member, County Legislature's Committee on Public Safety
- A practicing attorney for 18 years, specializing in Family Law
- Member, Monroe County Youth Board
- Trial counsel for Department of Social Services, Child Protection Division, handling ALL abuse and neglect cases in Monroe County Family Court, 1968-1972.
- Member, Children's Alliance Board of Monroe County
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NFP Schedule

A Natural Family Planning class for engaged and married couples is scheduled for 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, Nov. 1, at St. Joseph's Hospital in Elmira. The class is limited to six couples. Those who wish to enroll should register with the instructors, Nick and Beryl Iven, 607-594-2380. Information sessions, open to the public without charge, are scheduled for 7:30 p.m. Monday, Nov. 6, at the Kearney Building, St. Mary's Hospital, Rochester, and 8 p.m. Wednesday, Nov. 8, at St. Joseph's.