

Your Turn

Most in Criminal Justice Honest and Dedicated

By Sheriff Andrew P. Meloni

The local criminal justice system has been under constant fire for the past 2 1/2 years and the end is not in sight.

Just recently the media announced the Hall of Justice would be reverberating based on the assumption that a former Sheriff's Investigator had divulged "new" information as a result of some plea bargaining.

A great deal of the awesome toll this has taken on the system rests on the shoulders of those who perform daily in a most honorable and productive manner.

If the system is in need of cleansing because of an end justifies the means mentality (which somehow pervades every organization, but more often than not is kept under control), then let us move on with the task.

But during the process, let us all keep in mind that the overwhelming majority of people in our local criminal justice system are honest, dedicated high performers who are losing their self-image, self-respect, and self-worth through negative publicity which is prevalent during this cleansing period.

What is occurring now, although uncomfortable and sometimes unbearable, may be the best thing that has ever happened to our system — the close public scrutiny of how we do business. Historically, the system has not had such close scrutiny following major scandal acknowledgement and therein may lie the problem.

We need to restore confidence to the entire system.

In this series, widely known persons, at the newspaper's request, will present their thoughts on varied topical issues. The opinions expressed are not necessarily those of the newspaper. Other readers are also invited to submit articles for "Your Turn" and whether or not they are used will be up to the editor.

One way to accomplish this goal is full disclosure and a baring of the soul. If all of this results in a number of lessons which, if followed, would prevent any recurrence of such a serious and difficult problem, then let us get on with the task at hand.

In the meantime, all of us in and out of the system should maintain a sense of balance and not be too quick to make rash judgments.

The current system is somewhat sensitive, distrustful, and almost paranoid as a result of the recent and past disclosures. So it is taking its toll.

If the cleansing moves us toward better communication, establishing better controls and self-assessment, then it will have been worth it. But God help us if all of this means a widening of the gaps already in the system.

I once heard a ranking member of the Scotland Yard Police Agency revel at the "saintly" picture we have painted of our police in America.



Monroe County Sheriff Andrew Meloni.

In England, it is not uncommon to find an officer arrested for speeding or the like. The Scotland Yard official felt it merely showed how "human" police are; that we, like you, make errors in judgment.

He also related how much easier it was to enforce the law because the public perceived the officer as not above the law, but merely equal to the citizens who make up our society.

When persons in our criminal justice system violate the code, the system cracks down hard on them. Offenders often are incarcerated even though it is their first time in trouble. Careers and families are shattered. It is an awesome and tragic thing to watch unfold.

Forum

Dignity of Life Attacked

By Beth Spring
Religion Today

Washington — Present-day concerns of the religious community, from American hostages in Iran to Cambodian refugees, are being met by prayer vigils, monetary support and political activism.

But, closer to home, daily attacks on human dignity often seem to escape attention.

One of the more blatant instances — in which more than 8,300 sterilizations took place in Virginia's public mental institutions — did not escape the notice of Bishop Walter F. Sullivan of the Diocese of Richmond. This occurred over 48 years.

In a letter to the people of his diocese, Bishop Sullivan wrote "Our society labeled the retarded, the mentally ill, and those with behavioral problems as 'misfits'. With this label, society justified itself in stripping a segment of the population of equal protection under the law. The 'misfits' became objects for exploitation rather than persons in need of healing love."

The sterilization program was within legal boundaries, although the letter states that "forced sterilization" of the mentally-impaired has been discontinued as public policy since 1972.

The bishop spelled out the dual tragedy of this practice: First, the program was implemented "under the guise of 'genetic purity,'" a concept roundly condemned by U.S. citizens when practiced by others.

In addition, the response of public officials, ranging from indifference to support to downright deception of the victims, requires an outpouring of "public indignation," Sullivan said.

He then asked the obvious question, "What else is happening in our society which might infringe on the rights and dignity of the individual, yet goes hidden from the public?"

Lately, it appears, one need look no further than the front page. In vitro fertilization (test-tube babies), artificial insemination (for people, not just cattle), and genetic engineering are all finding

practical application at laboratories around the country.

While there is little question of the scientific validity of these processes — they all "work" — Bishop Sullivan asks, "What does the future hold if we allow further human experimentation without sufficient ethical restrictions?"

He said such issues as the dignity of human life and informed consent were "dismissed as irrelevant" when legal permission was granted by the Virginia health commissioner for the in vitro clinic at Norfolk.

What may be done? Whatever it is, it is most likely to arise from the religious community — perhaps the last place where the innate value of every human being, rather than our intellectual, behavioral, or physical capacities, determines the basis for principles.

Bishop Sullivan makes some concrete suggestions: "We can learn that we must be consistent in our response to all forms of injustice. We can learn to be pro-life in our state institutions. . . . We can recommit ourselves to social action in behalf of justice."

It almost goes without saying — and the bishop left it unsaid — that if communities of believers in God neglect these now-common occurrences, they can be sure that threats to human dignity will continue and most likely increase.

Don't Bet On It!

The woman, who presently serves as the overseer of Virginia's mental health system said, "there is very little opportunity for it to happen again."

She was talking about the program by which the state, legally sterilized up to eight thousand "unfit" patients between 1924 and 1972.

My response to her: "Don't bet on it!"

The revelation of the scope of this program generated massive embarrassment and revulsion in the state of Virginia. Present officials would like to have us believe that this was just an unfortunate manifestation of an archaic, unenlightened insensitivity.

(Remember those archaic days of '72? That was the year of Watergate, of the shooting of George Wallace, of Mark Spitz' swimming medals at Munich.)

This program, now seen as so outrageous, didn't just slip into the state's practice without notice. It was supported by an 8-1 decision in the Supreme Court. There the judicial giant, Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote:

"It is better for all the world, if instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crimes, or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind."

But the Virginia official assures us that there's little opportunity for it to happen again. Somehow I'm not reassured when the same state has recently authorized the first American clinic to

Fr. John Reedy



Looking for the Lord

provide test tube babies, when a strange businessman in California announces a sperm bank based on the deposits of a few equally strange Nobel prize winners.

To me, the frightening thing about this sterilization program is what it reveals about the influence of popular emotion on public ethics.

Given the popular attitude of the country from the mid-20's until the civil rights campaigns of the '60's, I have no trouble understanding how a program of this kind could remain in force. It truly reflected a general social attitude toward those who had become problems for society; society had a right to protect itself; it was really kinder to protect these people from the burden of parenthood which they probably could not handle.

The revulsion today is not based on "hard" ethical reasoning. It arises from another popular, emotional attitude. People in public custody retain personal rights; bureaucracies should not manipulate the lives of individuals; personal decisions should be respected in all but the most extreme circumstances.

A few weeks ago, this column dealt with the difference between an ethics which arises from a recognition of principles and values and one which arises from a sensitivity and compassion for a person facing a difficult situation.

It seems to me that the turn-around in public attitude toward this sterilization program is a perfect example of what is wrong with the latter approach to ethical decisions.

Nothing has changed in the principles and values. All that has changed is public sensitivity to the person who is in conflict with the state.

And it's quite possible that this public sensitivity will reverse itself again when the emotional climate of the nation changes once more.

This is not a plea for the establishment of the ethical system of one religion. The documents on which our nation was founded recognized an ethical system based on firm principles and values.

Our institutions, notably the courts, simply haven't done a very good job in applying that kind of ethical thought to public issues.

One might take some consolation in this public repudiation of the judgment of Justice Holmes and his court. If such a change could take place with regard to compulsory sterilization, why not on abortion-on-demand?

Such a change could take place; I pray that it will. But the nation shall remain vulnerable to frightful ethical judgments as long as it formulates those judgments on the basis of emotional sensitivity rather than ethical principles.

More Opinions

Joins Prayer Crusade

Editor:

I would like to respond to the woman who asked for 500 letters indicating our contribution of prayers. Yes, I am

praying daily for the world leaders so that we can all live peaceably amongst each other. There really should be many more than just 500 but it's a start.

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