

Bishops Decry Capital Punishment

Continued from Page 8

the infliction of capital punishment. There is and has been a certain sense that even in those cases where serious justifications can be offered for the necessity of taking life, those who are identified in a special way with Christ should refrain from taking life. We believe that this should be taken as an indication of the deeper desires of the church as it responds to the story of God's redemptive and forgiving love as manifest in the life of his Son.

With respect to the difficulties inherent in capital punishment, we note first that infliction of the death penalty extinguishes possibilities for reform and rehabilitation for the person executed as well as the opportunity for the criminal to make some creative compensation for the evil he has done. It also cuts off the possibility of a new beginning and of moral growth in a human life which has been seriously deformed.

Second, the imposition of capital punishment involves the possibility of mistake. In this respect, it is not different from other legal processes, and it must be granted our legal system shows considerable care for the rights of defendants in capital cases. But the possibility of mistake cannot be eliminated from the system. Because death terminates the possibilities of conversion and growth and support that we can share with each other, we regard a mistaken infliction of the death penalty with a special horror, even while we retain our trust in God's loving mercy.

Third, the legal imposition of capital punishment in our society involves long and unavoidable delays. This is in large part a consequence of the safeguards and the opportunities for appeal which the law provides for defendants but it also creates a long period of anxiety and uncertainty both about the possibility of life and about the necessity of reorienting one's life. Delay also diminishes the effectiveness of capital punishment as a deterrent, for it makes the death penalty uncertain and remote. Death Row can be the scene of conversion and spiritual growth but it also produces aimlessness, fear and despair.

Fourth, we believe that the actual carrying out of the death penalty brings with it great and avoidable anguish for the criminal, for his family and loved ones, and for those who are called on to perform or to witness the execution. Great writers such as Shakespeare and Dostoevsky in the past and Camus and Orwell in our own time have given us vivid pictures of the terrors of execution not merely for the victim, but also for bystanders.

Fifth, in the present situation of dispute over the justifiability of the death penalty and at a time when executions have been rare, executions attract enormous publicity, much of it unhealthy, and stir considerable

acrimony in public discussion. On the other hand, if a substantial proportion of the more than 500 persons now under sentence of death are executed, a great public outcry can safely be predicted. In neither case is the American public likely to develop a sense that the work of justice is being done with fairness and rationality.

Sixth, there is a widespread belief that many convicted criminals are sentenced to death in an unfair and discriminatory manner. This belief can be affirmed with certain qualifications. There is a certain presumption that if specific evidence of bias or discrimination in sentencing can be provided for particular cases, then higher courts will not uphold sentences of death in these cases. But we must also reckon with a legal system which, while it does provide counsel for indigent defendants, permits those who are well off to obtain the resources and the talent to present their cases in as convincing a light as possible.

The legal system and the criminal justice system both work in a society which bears in its psychological, social and economic patterns the mark of racism. These marks remain long after the demolition of segregation as a legal institution. The end result of all this is a situation in which those condemned to die are nearly always poor and are disproportionately black. Thus 47 percent of the inmates on Death Row are black; whereas only 11 percent of the American population is black.

Abolition of the death penalty will not eliminate racism and its effects, an evil which we are called on to combat in many different ways. But it is a reasonable judgment that racist attitudes and the social consequences of racism have some influence in determining who is sentenced to die in our society. This we do not regard as acceptable.

We do not propose the abolition of capital punishment as a simple solution to the problems of crime and violence. As we observed earlier, we do not believe that any simple and comprehensive solution is possible. We affirm that there is a special need to offer sympathy and support for the victims of violent crime and their families. Our society should not flinch from contemplating the suffering that violent crimes brings to so many when it destroys life, shatters families and crushes the hope of the innocent.

Recognition of this suffering should not lead to demands for vengeance but to firm resolution that help be given to the victims of crime and that justice be done fairly and swiftly. The care and the support that we give to the victims of crime should be both compassionate and practical. The public response to crime should include the relief of financial distress caused by crime and the provision of medical and

psychological treatment to the extent that these are required and helpful. It is the special responsibility of the church to provide a community of faith and trust in which God's grace can heal the personal and spiritual wounds caused by crime and in which we can all grow by sharing one another's burdens and sorrows.

We insist that important changes are necessary in the correctional system in order to make it truly conducive to the reform and rehabilitation of convicted criminals and their reintegration into society. We also grant that special precautions should be taken to ensure the safety of those who guard convicts who are too dangerous to return to society.

We call on governments to cooperate in vigorous measures against terrorists who threaten the safety of the general public and who take the lives of the innocent. We acknowledge that there is a pressing need to deal with those social conditions of poverty and injustice which often provide the breeding grounds for serious crime. We urge particularly the importance of restricting the easy availability of guns and other weapons of violence. We oppose the glamorizing of violence in entertainment, and we deplore the effect of this on children. We affirm the need for education to promote respect for the human dignity of all people.

All of these things should form part of a comprehensive community response to the very real and pressing problems presented by the prevalence of crime and violence in many parts of our society.

We recognize that many citizens may believe that capital punishment should be maintained as an integral part of our society's response to the evils of crime, nor is this position incompatible with Catholic tradition. We acknowledge the depth and sincerity of their concern, we urge them to review the considerations we have offered which show both the evils associated with capital punishment and the harmony of the abolition of capital punishment with the values of the Gospel. We urge them to bear in mind that public decisions in this area affect the lives, the hopes and the fears of men and women who share both the misery and the grandeur of human life with us and who, like us, are among those sinners whom the Son of Man came to save.

We urge our brothers and sisters in Christ to remember the teaching of Jesus, who called us to be reconciled with those who have injured us and to pray for forgiveness for our sins "as we forgive those who have sinned against us." We call on you to contemplate the crucified Christ who set us the supreme example of forgiveness and of the triumph of compassionate love.

At Your Parish . . .



Sister Jean Rodman reminds the children of St. Nicholas' story.

St. Vincent, Churchville

St. Nicholas paid a visit to the children of St. Vincent de Paul parish, Churchville, recently to accept gifts, given by the youngsters, to be presented in turn to poor children in the area. The children each brought

a present, sometimes one of their own favorite toys, and presented it to St. Nicholas after a special parish family supper held in the church hall. The presents will be delivered by St. Nicholas to Bethany House in the city.

Holy Family, Rochester

The "Goodwillys" of Holy Family will sponsor a Communion Breakfast after 8, 10, and 12:00 Masses on Sunday, Jan. 4. The cost of the family breakfast is \$1 per person or \$5 per family.

Reservations must be made to attend, no later than Dec. 28. For further information, contact Marge Pollotta at 328-1676 or Dorothy Papineau at 235-6582.

St. Cecilia, Irondequoit

The Ladies' Guild at St. Cecilia's parish will hold an aerobic dancing exhibition starting at 7:30 p.m. on Tuesday, Jan. 6. St. Cecilia's is located at 2732 Culver Rd.

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St. Leo Hilton

The Children's Praise Choir will join the Adult Choir at St. Leo's Church, Hilton, for a special concert celebrating the Feast of the Epiphany, at 7 p.m. on Sunday, Jan. 4. Each choir will perform separately and a combined presentation of "Where is He?" by Maxine W. Posegate will conclude the concert. The concert is open to the public, admission is free.

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