

Public Opinion Flies in Face of Church Teaching

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from Texas, Ohio, Florida and Georgia for the years 1972 through 1977 showed that blacks convicted of murdering whites had been sentenced to death with 18 times the frequency of whites convicted of murdering whites.

Minorities still don't fare well in the sentencing lottery, according to the American Civil Liberties Union. An ACLU accounting in May showed that of the 792 inmates on death row throughout the country, 322 are blacks, 35 Hispanic, four American Indians, and two Asian — 45.8 percent of the total.

Death penalty proponents argue that state executions deter capital crime, that life terms are an economic burden, that prisons do not rehabilitate, and that persons who kill should pay with their lives.

Foes of capital punishment maintain that it has virtually no effect in reducing the rate of violent crime, can rarely be administered in a rational and

equitable way, and has resulted in judicial errors that have led to the execution of innocent people.

For some proponents, like Dr. Ernest van den Haag, a New York psychologist and author, executions by the state may have "a very strong symbolic value," a legal "vengeance" that "solidifies social solidarity against lawbreakers and probably is the only alternative to the disruptive private revenge of those who feel harmed."

According to Walter Berns, a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative research organization, retribution comes down to "the principle that punishment should fit the crime and the only punishment that fits some crimes — for example, some particularly heinous murders — is capital punishment."

Some churchmen would agree. United Methodist Bishop William R. Cannon of Atlanta, Ga., has said that every state in the union

ought to "practice" the death penalty.

Said the bishop: "The death penalty is spelled out clearly and completely in the Old Testament. Jesus confirmed it by his statement, 'I came not to destroy the law and the prophets.' ... Capital punishment alone seems to be society's last sad resort, to protect the lives and welfare of innocent people."

A report prepared for this summer's synod of the Christian Reformed Church concludes that the Bible does not require capital punishment, but permits it "under special circumstances and not as a general rule."

Most of the major national religious denominations, however, arguing, among other things, on the basis of their interpretation of the Word of God, have demanded total abolition of capital punishment.

Among them have been the American Baptist Churches, Roman Catholic Bishops, U.S. Episcopal Church, Lutheran Church

in America, Mennonite General Conference, and the Quakers' American Friends Service Committee.

Also, the National Council of Churches, Reformed Church in America, United Church of Christ, United Presbyterian Church, Unitarian Universalist Association, and the American Ethical Union.

Three major Jewish bodies have called for an end to the death penalty: the Synagogue Council of America, which represents the three main branches of American Judaism, the American Jewish Committee, and the Reform Jews' Union of American Hebrew Congregations.

Among more recent statements on capital punishment was that of the U.S. Catholic Conference (USCC), the national-level social action agency of the American bishops.

In testimony in May before the Senate Judiciary Committee, Bishop Ernest L. Unterkoefler of Charleston, S.C., urged the

lawmakers to reject death penalty legislation as a throw-back to less civilized eras.

The USCC spokesman, who spent three years as a chaplain in a Virginia prison, where he accompanied six men to the electric chair, told the Committee that "the prevalence of violent crime in our society underscores the need for effective measures to prevent crime and to assure a swift and certain response to criminal acts."

But, he insisted, "We believe that effective and humane alternatives can be developed without resorting to such simplistic and atavistic practices as capital punishment."

Bishop Unterkoefler noted that the U.S. Catholic hierarchy had voiced its opposition to the death penalty in 1974 and again in 1980.

In the 1980 statement, the bishops argued that abolishing the death penalty would help to break the cycle of violence since it would testify to the belief that society can protect lives

and preserve order without itself taking life.

The bishops also said that even if capital punishment were logically defensible, it would still conflict with the values of the Gospel.

Other churchmen agree. The Rev. George Beto of Huntsville, Tex., a Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod minister and a former director of the Texas Department of Correction, has said that capital punishment had little value as a crime deterrent, adding, "Its vindictiveness doesn't fit with the Judaeo-Christian tradition."

The Jesuit-edited magazine, America, in an editorial calling for abolition of the death penalty, said that as "a form of retribution, capital punishment is too much like revenge to be acceptable to Christians."

Says The Christian Century, an ecumenical weekly: "The social vengeance (of capital punishment) is clearly condemned by Christian teaching and by modern Judaism."

State Politicians Join Boycott

New York (RNS) — The Finast Supermarket chain has been asked to stop selling union-boycotted lettuce in a letter signed by 26 New York State politicians.

The "open letter" was delivered to the supermarket chain's vice president by members of Cesar Chavez's United Farm Workers Union

which initiated the boycott in the Fall of 1979.

The letter, signed by Lt. Gov. Mario Cuomo, state legislators and New York members of Congress, demanded removal of Red Coach brand lettuce from store shelves "until farm workers gain the protections and respect they need and

deserve under a United Farm Workers Union contract."

"As a decision-maker of a large supermarket chain in your area, you have an obligation to corporate responsibility," the politicians wrote. "You are not above questions of social justice."

Irv Hersehenbau, a spokesman at union headquarters in New York City, said the boycott of Bruce Church, which produces Red Coach lettuce, had grown to the extent that Finast and Stop & Shop were the only major supermarket chains in the Northeast which continue to carry Red Coach lettuce.

"We're going to put them out of business unless we get a contract," he said.

After being certified in 1977 as the bargaining agent for Bruce Church workers, the union negotiated a one-year contract beginning Jan. 1, 1978. The company then broke a strike which the union started a month later. Since then the union has permitted some workers to return to Bruce Church "under protest" and allowed others to work for other growers until it can settle with the company.

LEUKEMIA BENEFIT

The McCurdy-Seventeen Fashion Show will benefit the Leukemia Society of America, Finger Lake Chapter's programs of patient aid and research.

The show will be 1 p.m., Saturday, Aug. 8, at the Eastman Theatre. Tickets, \$1 each, are on sale at the Leukemia Society office at 15 Prince St., McCurdy's Junior Department and the Eastman Theatre Box Office.

Papal Assailant Gets Life

Rome (RNS) — The trial and sentencing of Pope John Paul II's would-be assassin have left too many questions unanswered, in the opinion of some Italian newspapers, said the Vatican newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano.

A court of two judges and six jurors, after deliberating for six hours, sentenced Mehmet Ali Agca to life imprisonment for attempting to kill the Pope May 13.

The 23-year-old Turkish terrorist also received an additional 10-year sentence for wounding two American women in St. Peter's Square at the time he shot the pope and for unlicensed possession of a gun and carrying false identity papers.

That part of the sentence was reduced to a year in solitary confinement.

The trial lasted only three days — unusual speed for an Italian court. Agca, who admitted in court that he had shot the pope, was entitled to appeal the verdict. But, since he had refused to recognize the right of the Italian court to try him for an act he committed in Vatican City, it was expected that he would not appeal. That would close the court record on Agca.

"But the books don't balance," said L'Osservatore

Romano. "Many question marks remain. Was it madness or was it something else that piloted the would-be homicide hand?"

Milan's Corrier della Sera put it more bluntly: "The doubt about a conspiracy remains," read a front-page headline. An editorial accused the Italian investigators of giving up too soon in their efforts to prove that Agca's attack was part of an international conspiracy.



ARCHBISHOP ROACH



ARCHBISHOP LAGHI

Knights To Hear Laghi, Roach

Louisville, Ky. — Two prominent prelates are scheduled to address the Knights of Columbus Supreme Council meeting here Aug. 18-20.

The speakers will include Archbishop Pio Laghi, apostolic delegate to the United States, who will be chief celebrant and homilist at the Mass opening the convention Aug. 18, and Archbishop John R. Roach of St. Paul-Minneapolis, who will be principal speaker at the States Dinner that evening.

Archbishop Roach is president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and of the U.S. Catholic Conference, the bishops' administrative secretariat.

A Vatican career diplomat, Archbishop Laghi is credited with handling a number of difficult assignments. He

served as apostolic delegate in Jerusalem and Palestine from 1969 to 1974. During that crucial time, Archbishop Laghi carried on his delicate mission without incurring the wrath of either the Jews or Arabs then disputing occupation of Jerusalem and West Jordan.

In 1974, he was named apostolic nuncio to Argentina and witnessed a military coup against President Maria Estela Peron.

Some 2,500 members are expected to attend the 99th annual meeting. Other activities will include a report by Supreme Knight Virgil C. Dechant, consideration of some 200 resolutions which will spell out the position of the world's largest Catholic fraternal society on current social and moral issues, and the election of seven members to the Board of Directors.

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