

In Depth

Parish's support helps sustain Florida inmate

By Lee Strong

In the days preceding the scheduled Jan. 24 execution of convicted serial murderer Ted Bundy, Florida residents were celebrating his impending death in the electric chair with black humor, holding "Ted Bundy Barbues" and listening to songs on the radio proclaiming that "Ted Bundy is gonna fry."

"The popular political mood in Florida is to kill people," acknowledged Elizabeth Dawson of the Florida Clearing House on Jails and Prisons. "Over 80 percent of the population supports the death penalty. We've had 19 executions since 1976 — that makes us second or third in the nation. Florida boasts the largest death row population in the country."

Amos Lee King is one of the 289 residents of Florida's death row. He came within 24 hours of execution on November 29, 1988, and now waits for his appeal to be heard March 6 in the Pinellas-Pasco Circuit Court.

King has been on death row since 1977. The last three years of his wait have been made easier by the people of St. Mary's Parish in Ontario. In late 1985, King began corresponding with Jim Connor, a member of the parish's social ministry committee. Connor brought the convict to the attention of the committee, and in 1986 the committee provided \$236 to help King get a transcript of his trial.

Since that initial donation, committee members have also sent King several packages containing such items as soap, pajamas, sneakers and books. Last year, the committee helped buy a bus ticket so that a terminally ill aunt who took care of the prisoner when he was young could see him one final time. She died of cancer shortly after the visit.

On November 28, 1988, King, believing he was only two days from his death, wrote a letter to the *Courier-Journal* telling part of his story. In the letter he said: "You may wonder why I share my story with you. It's because some people from a church in your diocese have helped me and I want my gratitude to be known. St. Mary's Church in Ontario reminds me of how the early Christians must have been."

Jim Connor has a simpler view of their relationship. "When you see somebody that's hurting, you just do what you can," he remarked.

Amos King has been hurting most of his life. A victim of child abuse, he was using drugs by age 14, and by 16 he was a heroin addict. When he was 17, he saw his father kill his mother.

King first served time in prison in 1972 on a burglary conviction. In 1975, he was arrested for stealing a shotgun and was sent to the minimum-security Tarpon Springs Community Correctional Facility. At Tarpon Springs, he was considered a responsible, cooperative prisoner. He was participating in a work release program, and had a job as a dish washer at a nearby restaurant.

In the early morning hours of March 18, 1977, someone brutally beat, raped, mutilated and murdered a 68-year-old white woman who lived within view of the prison. The killer then set the woman's house on fire.

Reports in the *St. Petersburg Times* at that time say that on the morning of the murder, King, who is black, was returning to the prison after completing his shift at the restaurant. In testimony given at King's murder trial, a guard said he saw the prisoner trying to get back into a prison at 3 a.m. The guard said he noticed that King's pants were blood-stained at the crotch. When the guard approached King, the inmate

allegedly attacked him, stabbing him 20 times with a knife, and then ran away. On March 22, a blood-stained paring knife similar to knives found in the dead woman's kitchen was discovered in the woods near the prison. The blood was the guard's.

On the way to the prison to respond to the attack on the guard, police sighted the burning house and discovered the woman's body.

On March 20, King turned himself in to police. He was questioned about the woman's death and charged with her murder. Denying that he had killed the woman, he admitted that he had stabbed the guard. King claimed, however, that the guard had attacked him with the knife, and suggested that the guard was responsible for the woman's death.

On July 5, King was put on trial for the woman's murder. Thomas Cole, the public defender assigned to King's case, requested eight times — both before and during the trial — that the accused be given another lawyer, since Cole had finished another murder trial just two weeks earlier. The lawyer said he had only had time to meet King twice, had not talked to witnesses, and had not had time to adequately review the evidence. His requests were denied.

At the trial, the guard testified about the assault and King's blood-stained pants. The pants were not produced as evidence, nor was any explanation of what happened to them given. This guard, and another guard who came to help before King ran away, said that King had apparently been drinking. Meanwhile, medical reports showed that the man who raped the elderly woman had the same blood type as King.

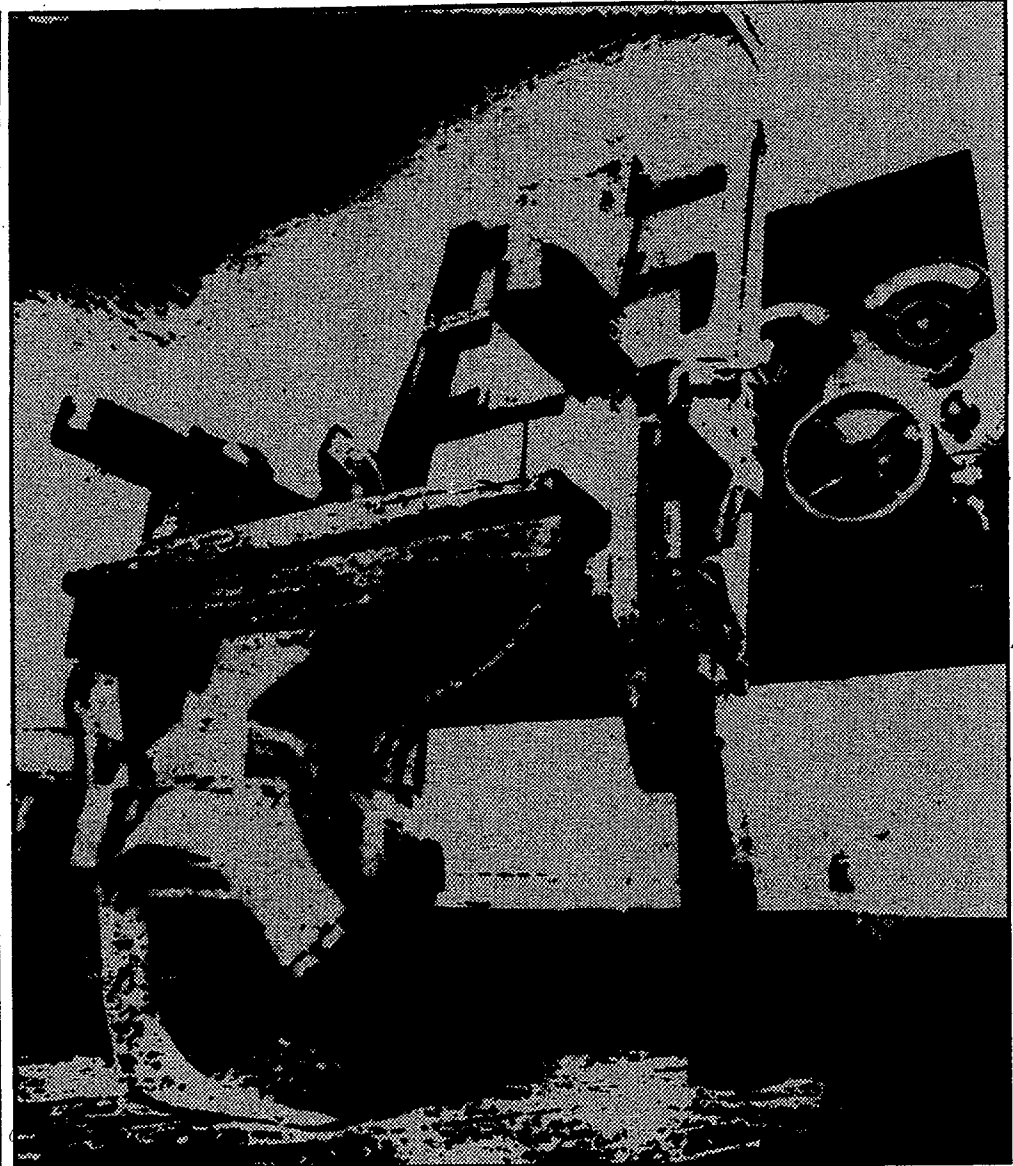
The trial lasted only three days. King was found guilty and sentenced to death on July 8, 1977. On May 11, 1980, however, the Florida Supreme Court ruled that King had not been adequately represented and ordered a new trial. He was found guilty again, and on Nov. 9, 1985, he was resentedenced to death. The Florida Supreme Court reaffirmed the conviction on Sept. 24, 1987.

On Nov. 28, 1988, just two days before King's scheduled execution, attorneys from the Office of the Capital Collateral Representatives (CCR), a Florida state agency created in 1975 to represent prisoners on death row, filed a plea in the Pinellas-Pasco Circuit Court. According to Judy Dougherty of the CCR, the judge refused to read the plea, saying, "You guys should have filed it earlier." The next day, the Florida Supreme Court declared that the judge's actions had been improper, and that in a case involving the death penalty, a prisoner must be given every opportunity to present his case. King's new hearing is scheduled to begin March 6.

"I feel real strongly that his case has never been adequately presented," Dougherty said in a telephone interview. "We went back and looked at (the second trial), and his lawyer didn't do things he should have done. We have alleged in the proceeding that the lawyer did not do an extensive investigation."

Dougherty also said that King is different than many of the other prisoners CCR represents. "Of the clients that we work with, he is very pleasant and deserving of support," she commented. "He seems a very mild-mannered and cooperative person. He's had a rough time in his life."

During much of the time since his second conviction, King has been in contact with Connor. The St. Mary's parishioner became involved with the prisoner after reading a maga-



zine ad King had placed, requesting correspondents. The two started writing, and Connor was struck by the prisoner's story and his apparent honesty.

"I had written to maybe four other prisoners off and on, and with every other one it was a scam — just an effort to get money," Connor said. "He was never like that."

Connor also sensed a consistency to what King said. "There's a lot of internal evidence from his letters that seems to hold together," he said. "His story has hung together in the time that I've known him."

Bringing several letters with him, Connor raised the case at a meeting of the parish social ministry committee. Louis Rivellino, co-chair of the committee said committee members readily voted to provide money for the transcripts. "Jim came to us pleading for the man," he noted. "When he comes to us, he normally comes with a good cause."

Rivellino said that the fact that King has kept writing to Connor is a sign of the prisoner's sincerity. "From the way Amos is talking to Jim in his letters, it doesn't sound like he's trying to buffalo Jim," he remarked. "He already got the money, but he keeps writing to him. He hasn't asked for more."

Connor said he found it easy to sympathize with King and to be suspicious of the legal system in Florida because of his own experiences of prejudice in the South during World War II. Stationed in North Carolina, Connor once sat in a "black" seat on a bus. The bus driver refused to continue his route until Connor got up from the seat. Connor had to stand throughout the trip because the only seats available were in the black section of the bus.

According to Dawson, although prejudice in the South is less overt than it was in the past, it is still present, and Connor is right to be suspi-

rious. "We're all drinking from the same water fountain, but there's still a lot of discrimination going on," she said.

Dawson pointed out that blacks make up most of the population on Florida's death row, and estimated that 90 percent of the convicts on death row were convicted for killing whites. "You're much more likely to get the death penalty if you kill a white than if you kill a black," she said. "This is a problem that permeates the entire southern region."

Connor said he was happy to hear that King will be allowed to appeal his case once again, and acknowledged that philosophically he is opposed to the death penalty in general. "I don't think the death penalty solves anything," he said.

"I think it was Thomas Aquinas who said that if a person does something wrong he should be reprimanded, and if they continue they should be separated from society. There was no mention of death," Connor said. "From Aquinas's point of view, the purpose of punishment is correction, not the thought of vengeance. Vengeance should be left to God."

The St. Mary's parishioner admitted, however, that he might feel differently if a crime of violence had been committed against someone close to him. "I often feel I can theorize about something because I'm not the one who was hurt," Connor said. "How irascible could I be if it did hurt me? I don't know."

And what if King is guilty? Would Connor still have given the prisoner the help that he has? Would he continue to write to him as he plans to do?

"I don't know that he didn't do it," Connor remarked. "Suppose he did do it. Why should I punish him before he dies? Should we make it just as miserable as we can before it happens? I don't think that's right."

Integrated spirituality focus of Thomas Merton workshop

Monsignor William Shannon, president of the International Thomas Merton Society, will direct a Merton workshop entitled "Toward an Integrated Spirituality," beginning Friday, Jan. 27, at 7:30 p.m. and running through 3:30 p.m. on Sunday, Jan. 29. The workshop will take place at the Cenacle Center for Spiritual Renewal, 693 East Avenue, Rochester, 14607.

The workshop, which will employ Merton's own writings, is intended to promote an understanding and appreciation of his multifaceted character, and to encourage research and study of his work.

The suggested offering for the workshop is \$65. For more information, call the Cenacle Ministry Office at 716/271-8755.

Shelter

Continued from page 1

Privett said. "But that won't be a requirement. They will not be denied services if they choose not to take part in the public-assistance programs."

Some shelter volunteers have also questioned the center's Joseph Avenue location for reasons of safety and distance from the shelter at Blessed Sacrament. Privett quickly put such concerns aside, citing the building's close proximity to the shelter at St. Bridget's and the fact that it will be on a bus route.

A contract for services CFC will provide at the center for the state Department of Social Services will be subject to final approval by the State Division of the Budget, the state comptroller and the state attorney general. The state may also require that the CFC accept referrals from Rochester-area shelters and other emergency

housing sources.

Privett expected final approval on the contract by this summer, and said he hopes to have the shelter in operation by June, 1990.

The renovation of the Joseph Avenue warehouse will cost more than \$700,000, but some of the difference between the grant amount and the total cost has already been raised by area parishes and organizations. Among the churches donating funds to the project were St. Ambrose (\$32,500) and St. Louis in Pittford (\$8,000).

The CFC has also received donations from the Martin Luther King Foundation and the Rochester Real Estate Board. The law firm of Osborn, Reed, Vandevate and Burke has contributed legal services, the value of which Privett estimated to be about \$5,000. The County of Monroe has committed approximately \$25,000 for the project, and on Wednesday, Jan. 18, CFC submitted a proposal to the City of Rochester for \$50,000.

"That (the city proposal) should be approved within weeks," Privett said.

The balance of the funding will come through a mortgage with Norstar Bank in Rochester. "We'll be working with parish groups to raise any additional funds," Privett said.

The Francis Center must also meet zoning requirements of the City of Rochester. Privett added that "one critical piece" in meeting the necessary zoning variance "is the city's agreement to sell us lots at the corner of Joseph and Sullivan."

The reservation of state funds is binding until March 31, at which time the money may be withdrawn if sufficient progress has not been made in the development of the Francis Center. Privett said CFC has already submitted to the state a revised capital and operating budget as well as a project brief and narrative to reflect the change in the number of permanent and emergency beds.

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