

Bishop denounces death penalty

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Governor Mario Cuomo has set the stage for a battle with his March 20 veto of the death penalty bill passed by the New York State Legislature earlier this year.

The Diocese of Rochester will be a player on that stage.

On Good Friday, March 24, Bishop Matthew H. Clark strongly opposed reinstating New York's death penalty in a statement he issued, calling for people to petition their legislators to oppose an attempt to override Governor Cuomo's veto. Supporters of the death penalty claim 99 of the 100 votes needed for a legislative override, and hope to gain still more supporters by late May or early June, when the override vote is expected.

Meanwhile, the Division of Social Ministry, through its diocesan and regional offices, will lobby against the override and continue the process of educating Catholics in the diocese about the U.S. bishops' opposition to the death penalty. Division officials have also chosen the death penalty as a target issue for the next year.

Among divisional efforts to fight the override are an information packet about the death penalty to be mailed to parishes within the next two weeks. The packet includes notes for a suggested homily on the weekend of April 14 and 15, and suggestions about letter-writing and petition campaigns. In addition, Father John Firpo, director of the Division of Social Ministry, will submit an article to the opinion page of Rochester's Gannett newspapers.

According to Lourdes Perez-Albuerne, the division's associate director for justice and peace, the diocesan effort is prompted by the closeness of this year's vote, but also by the consistent stance of the church regarding all life issues. "For us, coming out of our moral principles, the death pen-

alty is one more violation of the whole consistent ethic of life," she said.

In last week's statement, Bishop Clark linked the death penalty to abortion, calling both forms "of institutionalized violence." He said that Jesus knew violence, and was a victim of violence himself through his passion and death, yet "he did not live by violence." Instead, "Jesus challenged the depth of the human heart by showing mercy, healing and forgiveness."

Bishop Clark noted that those who favor the death penalty "believe that the families of victims of violent crime have a right to revenge." He said the desire for vengeance is understandable, but said "revenge is an evil, and not of God." He urged people to consider instead "the crucified Christ, who set for us the supreme example of forgiveness and triumph of compassionate love," and thus to "no longer choose violence and death, but choose mercy and life!"

Despite such statements from Bishop Clark and the other U.S. Catholic bishops, Assemblyman Frank Talomie, R-Geneva, a Catholic who co-sponsored the state assembly's death penalty bill, said he will continue to support capital punishment. "We have to give some consideration to the families of victims," he said.

Talomie said he knows several people who have lost loved ones because of violent crimes. "Without exception, their families are in favor of the death penalty," he said, adding that he has surveyed the people in the 129th District which he represents, and even his Catholic constituents favor the death penalty.

Talomie said he supports capital punishment not only because his constituents favor it, but also because of changed perceptions among criminals. "I think basically the tenor of the criminal society today is demonstrating its disregard for the sanctity of human life," he said, citing a growing murder rate in the United States. He added

that he believed capital punishment would serve as a deterrent to violent crime.

Melissa Marquez, legislative coordinator for the Division of Social Ministry, described as "myths" beliefs that the death penalty serves as a deterrent or that it is cheaper than keeping someone imprisoned for life. One of the goals of the division's education campaign will be to dispel such myths, she said.

In combating these myths, however, the church must contend with the media, according to Kevin Hennessy, Finger Lakes region director of justice and peace. Hennessy pointed out that most media reports about the death penalty cover only reasons for supporting it. "I don't hear reasons why people would vote against the death penalty as a matter of public debate," he said. "We don't seem to be talking about the right and wrong of it, just how many votes it will get."

Since most people in this country are educated by the media, he said, the death penalty is made to seem an easy, inexpensive answer to crime problems. "Cheap, sensationalistic solutions are much preferred," he said. "We'd rather watch cop shows than watch shows that deal with social justice issues."

The U.S. Catholic bishops have been consistent in their opposition to the death penalty, but the "message of the bishops does not get through with the kind of force that the media has," Hennessy suggested.

Perez-Albuerne acknowledged that locally, education about the death penalty and the reasons that U.S. bishops oppose it has not been a major focus. Until recently, she said, the possibility that the death penalty might return to New York has been slim, and thus the issue has not been a priority.

This year, however, legislators are claiming enough votes to override the governor's veto. The New York State Catholic



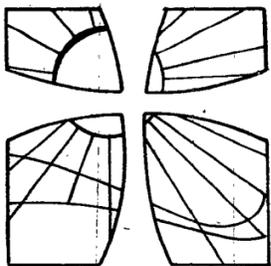
Conference has thus designated the death penalty a "critical issue." At a lobbying day held January 31, delegates from the conference and the eight dioceses of New York met with their representatives to discuss such targeted issues as the death penalty, public assistance grant increases and school aid for removing asbestos.

Like the diocesan approach to education on such other issues as abortion and nuclear weapons, Perez-Albuerne said, the death penalty issue will be intertwined with the consistent-ethic-of-life focus of the church.

Packets to be distributed to parishes will include a summary of the U.S. Catholic bishops' 1980 statement on the death penalty, articles explaining the church position and linking the death penalty to spiraling violence, and a bibliography as well as statements from people who have lost loved ones to violent crime, but who still oppose the death penalty. "There are people who say (that) the least we need is another killing in our name," Perez-Albuerne said.

"It really comes down to a conversion of heart and a reverence for life," Marquez said. "We don't have any expectations that, because we tell people to write to their legislators, they will write. We're prepared to provide education, to walk with them so they can come to their own decision."

Easter Sunday is only the beginning of joyful season



GROSS OF GLORY
LIFE IN CHRIST

By Father Robert Kennedy
Guest columnist

Alleluia! The resurrection of Jesus Christ has broken the bonds of sin and death once and for all, and our liturgical celebrations of Eastertime take away all fear and enable us to live with courage the faith we have received!

Yet I have to confess to one lingering apprehension: I fear we have already finished celebrating Easter, although this season of joy has just begun.

Parishes spend a great deal of time and effort in providing a Lenten season which will prepare the elect for the Easter sacraments and which will renew the faithful in living the Christian life. However, Lent is

only one-half of this liturgical season. The 50 days of Easter continue and extend what was begun or strengthened during the 40 days of Lent. Where Lent focused on initiation and reconciliation in the life of the faith community, Easter focuses on the Eucharist and mission of that community. Initiation and reconciliation have an "after" as well as a "before;" they lead to full participation in the life of the church. It is the purpose of the Easter season to strengthen the community's life in the risen Christ.

No parish can afford to pass up this time for helping its people to practice the Easter faith by which we have become a new creation. There are at least three ways in which parishes do this.

First, parishes must provide good celebrations of the Sunday Eucharist to foster and nourish faith in the risen Christ. The Eucharist, of course, was the goal and completion of the Lenten processes of initiation and reconciliation; but it is also the means by which the new faith or reconciled life continues to be nourished, strengthened and brought to maturity.

Second, it is the particular concern of the parish and the whole Church to care for the newly baptized or "neophytes" during this time. This is the next stage in their initiation process, the period of postbaptismal catechesis or mystagogy.

Mystagogical catechesis is not just for neophytes, however. Since postbaptismal formation is a lifelong process, it is for all the faithful, every Sunday of every year of our lives. The preaching and celebration of the Easter season focuses our attention on the fact that we are never finished understanding and deepening our participation in the mystery of Christ until we meet him face to face.

Third, the Easter season is the time when the church renews its mission to the world. Against the background of the Acts of the Apostles, the parish reflects on the ways it proclaims the good news of the risen Christ and the means by which it brings the reconciliation gained by Christ into our everyday world. The parish prays for the spirit of Pentecost, that all believers might have courage and patience when facing the obstacles to that good news, for going in peace to love and serve the Lord is not as easy as it seems.

In the weeks between now and Pentecost, we will reflect on the meaning of life in the risen Christ, a life centered on the Eucharist, but reaching out to all the world.

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