

Religious leaders declare rejection of death penalty

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — In an effort to head off the possible reinstatement of the death penalty in New York state, 11 leaders of Rochester's religious community, including Bishop Matthew H. Clark, have issued a joint statement opposing the death penalty.

"As religious leaders we speak out against this and we urge members of the religious community to declare, with us, a resounding no — it must not be!" the 11 declared in their statement, released Monday, April 24, at a Rochester press conference.

Just prior to the press conference, Genesee Ecumenical Ministries hosted a breakfast meeting to which Monroe County representatives to the New York state legislature were invited. Attending the breakfast were Democrat Assemblyman Gary Proud of the 131st District, and representatives from the offices of Republican Paul Kehoe and Democrat Ralph Quattrociochi, who represent the 53rd and 55th senate districts respectively.

State legislators are expected to vote in June whether to override Governor Mario Cuomo's March 20 veto of the death penalty measure passed by the legislature earlier this year. The possibility that death penalty proponents may, for the first time in 13 attempts, have enough votes to override a veto prompted GEM to pull together religious leaders to voice opposition to the death penalty, according to the Rev. Lawrence Witmer, GEM's director.

Bishop Clark, serving as spokesman for the group, said "We do believe the death penalty is not a good thing for New York." He added that the death penalty would en-

able the state to take over a "dominion" that rightfully belongs to God.

In summarizing the group's statement, Bishop Clark asserted that arguments in favor of the death penalty do not hold up. Statistics do not indicate that it serves as a deterrent to violent crime, he said. Retribution, he pointed out, is "not properly exercised by the taking of life." He also contended that the death penalty is applied unevenly, discriminating against the poor and minorities. Finally, Bishop Clark said, execution deprives individuals of the opportunity to reform. "No person is beyond the mercy of God," he declared.

Joining Bishop Clark and the Rev. Witmer in signing the statement were: Bishop William Burrill of the Episcopal Diocese of Rochester; the Rev. Raymond Graves, president of United Church Ministry; the Rev. David Hoecker, dean of the Genesee/Finger Lakes Conference of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; the Rev. Frank Ichishita, executive presbyter of the Presbytery of Genesee Valley;

Rabbi Alan Katz of Temple Sinai; the Rev. William Pegg, superintendent of the Rochester district of the United Methodist Church; the Rev. Jeanette Sherrill, area minister to the United Church of Christ; the Rev. Dr. Carrol Turner, executive of the American Baptist Churches of the Rochester/Genesee Region; and the Rev. Richard Gilbert, pastor of the First Unitarian Church.

According to the Rev. Witmer, Bishop Clark was chosen as spokesman for the group because he had already made his opposition to the death penalty widely known — especially through a statement he issued Good Friday. "I think he has certainly ta-



Linda Dow Hayes/Catholic Courier

Area religious leaders responded to questions during a press conference following the release of their joint statement opposing the death penalty.

ken a very public stand on (the death penalty) and that it is important to recognize his leadership on this issue," Rev. Witmer said.

Bishop Clark pointed out that the National Conference of Catholic Bishops has consistently voiced opposition to the death penalty since the early 1970s. He noted also that the majority of New York's bishops have expressed opposition to the death penalty this year.

In arguing against the return of the death penalty to New York state — where no one has been executed since the 1963 — Bishop Clark said, "Part of our concern is that capital punishment escalates violence in an

already violent culture." Citing the violent behavior surrounding the Jan. 24 execution of convicted murderer Ted Bundy in Florida, the bishop said "We're concerned about the moral tone of society."

The breakfast and the press conference are part of the overall effort local churches will make to oppose reinstatement of capital punishment in the state, the Rev. Witmer noted. Copies of the statement will be provided to all GEM-affiliated congregations. Congregations, in turn, will be encouraged to include it or similar statements in their bulletins and newsletters "to convey the significance we are giving this is-

Continued on page 16

Courier wins nine awards at annual New York Press Association gala

Topping last year's eight-award level, the staff of the *Catholic Courier* was recognized nine times — including two first-place honors — during the New York Press Association's annual convention in Albany April 14-15.

The awards were presented as part of the press association's annual Better Newspaper Contest, which recognizes member publications for outstanding work in the previous calendar year.

The *Courier* received first-place recognition in the category of best special section (tabloid size) for the August, 1988, back-to-school supplement, "A Lifetime of Learning." The section was praised for its "excellent editorial content and photos."

The *Courier's* other first-place citation was in the category of best special coverage of sports for Richard A. Kiley's coverage of the McQuaid basketball team's 1988 winning trip to the New York state

Class A Championships. Judges cited the coverage for "good and thorough" writing, "great photos" and layout well-done. "Others tried (the) recap idea this season but were not as successful," they said.

Kiley's efforts were also recognized with second-place honors in the overall category of best sports coverage. Judges cited great photos and photo usage, fine writing and layout.

Associate editor Teresa A. Parsons took second-place honors in the best feature story category for the article "Rural poor pay painful price for indecent housing," which the judges called a "well-written and reported account" of the low-income housing crisis in Wayne County. "I am impressed by the fact that she is able to put the reader inside the home of a woman with no toilet or heater," one judge wrote. "A good read."

For the third consecutive year, the *Cour-*

ier has been recognized for its high-quality photographs, this year winning second-place honors in the category of overall photographic excellence. Judges cited photographer Linda Dow Hayes' "good eye."

Former *Courier* photographer Bonnie Trafelet also received recognition for individual photos and picture stories. Calling her photo of the DeSales baseball team's celebration of their Class C baseball championship a "good emotional shot," judges

awarded her third place for sports feature photo.

Trafelet was also honored for photo essays of a Zoomobile's visit to Our Lady of Perpetual Help School and of Father Conrad Sundholm's many birds, which won third place and honorable mention, respectively, in the best picture story category.

Rounding out the *Courier's* awards was an honorable mention for best front page.

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