

The spirituality of martyrdom

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Father Thomas Stahel, SJ, executive editor of *America* magazine, published an article, "Updated Arguments for Optimism in the Church" in its Feb. 15, 1992, edition.

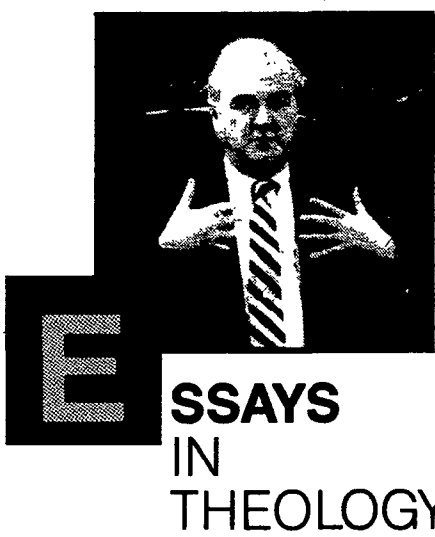
The idea for the piece came to him in the course of a conversation with a fellow priest whom he described as "gloomy about the future of the church."

Although sympathetic with his friend's concerns, Father Stahel found himself arguing for a "broader perspective." In his article he identifies two movements that offer grounds for optimism: liberation and martyrdom.

The first movement, in turn, has two closely related aspects: the sudden and rapid liberation of Eastern Europe from communist rule, and the more gradual liberation of Latin America from social, economic and political oppression.

Now that the Marxist monolith has broken up and its Soviet center has "evanesced," Latin American bishops, sisters, priests, lay ministers and theologians are no longer on the defensive. They can proclaim and practice a "faith that does justice" without being called communists — or without getting shot.

The second movement, martyrdom, is of more immediate interest in this week's column because it will appear just after the church's most sacred time of the year, Holy Week.



Father Stahel speculates about the vast numbers of people who have suffered and died for their faith over the past several decades in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, China and Latin America.

These witnesses, or martyrs, "teach us that, ultimately, the only adequate response to the evil we see around us is a life well led. It is the only adequate grounds for optimism we have," the priest wrote.

Father Stahel's words echo those of the late Pope Paul VI in his apostolic exhortation of 1975, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (The Evangelization of the Modern World).

"The first means of evangelization," Paul VI wrote, "is the witness of an authentically Christian life."

He continued: "Modern men and women listen more carefully to witnesses than to teachers, and if they

do listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses ...

"It is, therefore, primarily by its conduct and by its life that the church will evangelize the world, in other words, by its living witness of fidelity to the Lord Jesus — the witness of poverty and detachment, of freedom in the face of the powers of this world, in short, the witness of sanctity" (n.41).

The 1971 World Synod of Bishops had made essentially the same point in its document *Iustitia in Mundo* (Justice in the World): "While the church is bound to give witness to justice, it recognizes that anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes.

"Hence," the synod continued, "we must undertake an examination of the modes of acting and of the possessions and lifestyle found within the church itself" (chapter III, paragraph 2).

The U.S. Catholic bishops took a similar position in their 1986 pastoral letter on the economy: "All the moral principles that govern the just operation of any economic endeavor apply to the church and its agencies and institutions; indeed the church should be exemplary" (para. 337).

Accordingly, the church must evangelize and minister for justice through martyrdom for justice. The high standard to which we presume to hold others we must be prepared to live up to ourselves.

If we should be searching for a spirituality this Holy Week to guide and shape our Christian life and

ministry, we need look no further than the spirituality of martyrdom.

To be a martyr is to be a witness. And to be a witness means that one has to practice what one preaches, to live — and not only to die — for one's deepest convictions of faith.

In the theological sense of the word, martyrdom is a matter of sacramentality. In the everyday sense of the word, it is a matter of credibility, authenticity and integrity.

I write these lines on March 19, the feast of St. Joseph, 23 years ago to the day that John Francis Whealon was installed as the 10th ordinary of my home Archdiocese of Hartford.

Whatever may have been his personal faults and failings, Archbishop Whealon's life was a seamless garment of consistency. His theology and piety were conservative and traditional, and so was his manner of life. Simple, unpretentious, detached.

He would have easily passed the World Synod's testing of "the modes of acting and of the possessions and lifestyle found within the church itself."

Less and less is the world — and church members themselves, for that matter — impressed with titles and offices and ritual display.

"Modern men and women," Pope Paul VI wrote, "listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if they listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses."

What better time than Holy Week for the church and each of its members to ponder these words?

Deadlines, policies can 'kill' people

By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce
Syndicated columnist

The Morton Drug Company, a family-owned chain of pharmacies in Wisconsin, recently announced that — despite the inconvenience to some customers and the possible loss of business — its stores would no longer carry cigarettes.

"We are trying to sell wellness and good health," said general manager Steve Morton, "and how can we do that if we are also providing products that kill people?"

Obedying the Fifth Commandment ("You shall not kill") in the workplace is sometimes not as easy or obvious as it may appear on the surface. Apart from the military and law enforcement, very few jobs encompass even the remotest possibility of a worker being required to kill another person in the line of duty. Yet there are other ways to kill without shooting someone.

The astronauts on the space shuttle Challenger, for example, died because of the incompetent work of

somebody — engineers, technicians, business executives, politicians — who may have been more worried about meeting deadlines and looking good than about protecting the lives entrusted in their care.

Joseph Kinney, the director of the National Safe Workplace Institute in Chicago, Ill., estimates that each year in the United States about 11,000 people are killed at work, while somewhere between 50,000 and 100,000 die of diseases caused by their workplace environments.

Last year, 25 workers died in a fire in the Imperial Food Products chicken-processing plant in North Carolina because someone had locked all the fire exit doors to prevent theft and to keep flies out.

The Domino's Pizza chain has come under great criticism because of its guarantee to deliver its pizzas "in 30 minutes or less." The effort to meet this deadline poses danger to life and limb for both delivery people and the general public.

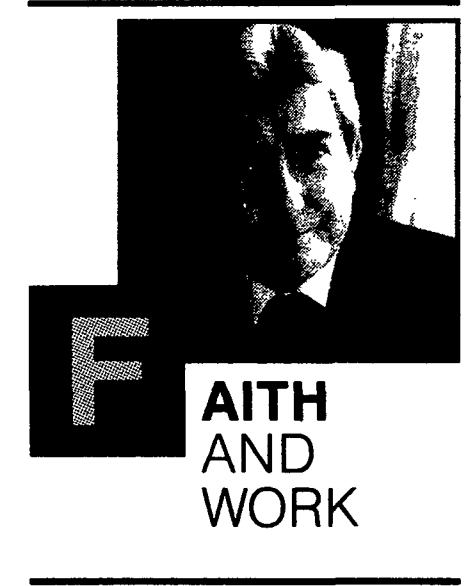
For those who believe in and try to follow the Judeo-Christian tra-

dition in the workplace, the Fifth Commandment can be a constant source of challenge.

Should doctors and nurses, technicians and maintenance people, for example, work for hospitals in which abortions or euthanasia are performed? Should television and radio stations air violent programs or accept advertising from firms that are polluting the environment?

Should politicians and judges bend to the popular demand for revenge by approving capital punishment? Should any employer be paying such low wages or providing such abysmal working conditions that they "kill" their workers' spirits in subtle or not-so-subtle ways?

Even the act of ending someone's job can be a form of "killing." For many people, work is a source of livelihood, self-respect and even spirituality. For an employer to terminate a worker with no explanation or notice, move a factory or business out of a community or out of the country, or even force



someone to retire prematurely can be — under certain circumstances — a sin.

No easy answers exist to these dilemmas. As we struggle to connect our faith with our daily work, however, shouldn't we at least consider the Fifth Commandment?

Kids' Chronicle activity answer key

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|--------------------|----------------------|
| 1. raise, last | 4. my Father's house |
| 2. leave | 5. with, always |
| 3. overcome, world | |

HIDDEN WORD: ALLELUIA

It pays to advertise in the

CATHOLIC
COURIER