

# Catholics and capital punishment

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

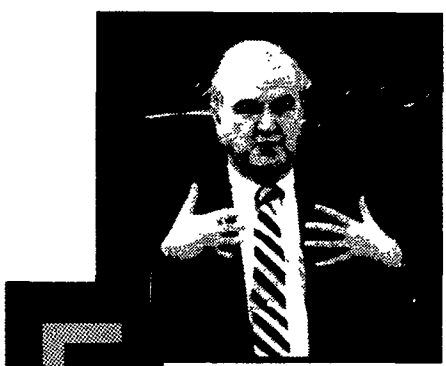
Recent, highly publicized executions in Arkansas, California, Texas, Virginia and elsewhere have once again raised the question of the morality of capital punishment.

According to polls, most Americans are in favor of capital punishment. In some sections of the country — especially the South — a governor would commit political suicide by commuting a death sentence, granting clemency, or vetoing a capital punishment bill, as New York's Gov. Mario Cuomo did last month for the 10th consecutive year.

Although there are many Catholics who oppose both abortion and capital punishment, there are many others who are pro-life on the former and against life on the latter. And some don't seem to notice the inconsistency.

Some bishops, for example, boycott a Catholic university graduation platform if a pro-choice Catholic politician is to be honored. But we have no recorded instance where a bishop has refused to share such a platform with a Catholic politician who supports capital punishment.

In 1980 the U.S. Catholic bishops issued an important "Statement on Capital Punishment" (*Origins*, vol. 10, Nov. 27, 1980, pp. 373-377). They began the statement with a remind-



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der that in 1974, "out of a commitment to the value and dignity of human life," the U.S. Catholic Conference, "by a substantial majority," voted to declare its opposition to capital punishment.

"We believe that in the conditions of contemporary American society, the legitimate purposes of punishment do not justify the imposition of the death penalty," the bishops said. "Furthermore, we believe that there are serious considerations which should prompt Christians and all Americans to support the abolition of capital punishment."

The bishops specifically rejected the argument that capital punish-

ment serves as a deterrent to murder and other serious crimes.

"Empirical studies in this area have not given conclusive evidence that would justify the imposition of the death penalty on a few individuals as a means of preventing others from committing crimes," they wrote. "The small number of death sentences in relation to the number of murders also makes it seem highly unlikely that the threat will be carried out and so undercuts the effectiveness of the deterrent."

According to the bishops, the death penalty's abolition would promote four values.

First, it would "break the cycle of violence," of taking a life for a life.

Second, it would manifest our belief in the "unique worth and dignity of each person from the moment of conception, a creature made in the image and likeness of God."

Third, it would bear testimony to the conviction that "God is indeed the Lord of life."

Fourth, it would be "consonant with the example of Jesus, who both taught and practiced the forgiveness of injustice ..."

At the same time, the bishops identified six "difficulties inherent in capital punishment."

First, the death penalty "extinguishes possibilities for reform and rehabilitation ... as well as the opportunity for the criminal to make

some creative compensation for the evil he has done."

Second, the death penalty always "involves the possibility of mistake," which the bishops regard "with a special horror."

Third, the appeals process generates "long and unavoidable delays" that create, in turn, "a long period of anxiety and uncertainty."

Fourth, the death penalty's carrying out brings with it "great and avoidable anguish for the criminal, for his family and loved ones, and for those who are called on to perform or to witness the execution."

Fifth, these executions attract "enormous publicity, much of it unhealthy, and stir considerable acrimony in public discussion."

Sixth, "there is a widespread belief that many convicted criminals are sentenced to death in an unfair and discriminatory manner." Indeed, the bishops regard it "a reasonable judgment that racist attitudes and the social consequences of racism have some influence in determining who is sentenced to die in our society."

One can understand, without condoning, some politicians' eagerness to "out-tough" their opponents on the death penalty. In doing so they are only reflecting the sentiment of the majority of voters.

What's distressing is that so many of those voters are Catholics.

# Good intentions not enough for God

By Father Albert Shamon  
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Luke 9:51-62; (R1) 1 Kings 19:16, 19-21; (R2) Galatians 5:1, 13-18.

Sunday's readings in the Old Testament and Gospel deal with momentous commitments: Elisha casting his lot with Elijah, and Jesus firmly resolving to go to Jerusalem.

Elisha's commitment was tested by his possessions: he had to leave a family wealthy enough to have 12 teams of oxen and the hired help to work them and with enough land to need them. Jesus's commitment was tested by the cross — "he firmly resolved to proceed toward Jerusalem" and crucifixion.

A sluggish stream flows toward the Adriatic Sea in the north of Italy. It is not much of a river, yet it is one of the most famous rivers in history. In 49 B.C. Julius Caesar drove his chariot through that river.

The Roman senate, under the domination of Pompey, Caesar's rival, had ordered Caesar — who had won such splendid victories in Gaul — to disband his legions.

That was the turning point in Julius Caesar's career. The moment he received the tidings he started for the Rubicon — the river that divided Cisalpine Gaul from Italy proper. On the bank of that river, Caesar had to make a momentous decision. He said to his companions, "If I pass not this river immediately, it will be the beginning of all misfortune. The die is cast!"

With that he drove his chariot into the river, crossed the Rubicon, and stood on the Italian side, ready for battle and ready for destiny.

We never hear of people of feeble resolve. Christianity is essentially for heroes, for those ready to risk all to follow Christ. The greatest conquest to which we all are called is won only by resolve and decision — like that of Elisha and Jesus.

Bela Karolyi, a Rumanian gymnastic coach, produced world and Olympic champion Nadia Comaneci. Karolyi defected to the U.S. in 1981 with a suitcase, leaving everything else behind — including his Mercedes. He set his mind on freedom and a new life and never looked back. Today he trains more

than 300 youths at his Sundance Athletic Club in Houston.

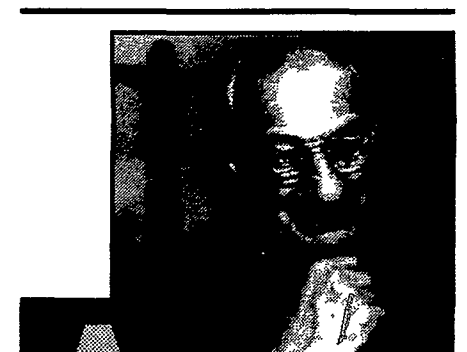
Likewise, his approach to gymnastics is a never-look-back attitude. To attain world-class status in gymnastics the way Comaneci did, an athlete must become a disciple of a master such as Karolyi.

First, she must sacrifice her own personal comfort and follow a strenuous training program. Second, she must reorder her priorities, attach supreme importance to gymnastics and subordinate everything else. Third, she must make a single-minded commitment to persevere in spite of difficulties and disappointments.

These are the same three elements of discipleship required of Christ's followers in Sunday's Gospel. In responding to three individuals who offer to become his disciples, Jesus talks about three conditions.

First, He said the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. In other words, He was demanding that His followers be willing to make sacrifices with little concern for personal comfort.

Secondly, Jesus said, "Let the



## WORD FOR SUNDAY

dead bury their dead, even one's own family." In other words, God's kingdom must be given top priority, especially when conflicts of interest arise.

Finally, He said, "Whoever puts his hand to the plow but keeps looking back is unfit for the reign of God." In other words, a disciple must make an unswerving commitment to his or her mission.

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