

## Abstract norms must move to real actions

By Dr. Patricia Schoelles, SSJ  
Courier columnist

A recent letter to the editor expressed puzzlement that my June 16 column indicated that "church teaching" is against the death penalty. The letter cited a passage from the New Catechism in which the use of the death penalty is not absolutely forbidden.

The letter raises the question of what we mean when we use the term "church teaching." The idea of the church as teacher — "magisterium" refers to the church's role as teacher — is as old as the church itself. It is important not to oversimplify the several levels on which this moral teaching must take place.

I'll try to illustrate these levels by using this example of capital punishment, since that is the issue in question.

Over the course of its history, the church has indeed — "in cases of extreme gravity" — permitted limited use of capital punishment. But Catholic moral teaching always must be applied in concrete and particular situations. On the abstract level, it seems possible that some governments might be able to justify using capital punishment. But the possibility of a just exercise of capital punishment looks very questionable in Rwanda, for example, or in Haiti or Bosnia.

Thus it would seem that the universal and abstract statement in the



**THE MORAL LIFE**

New Catechism, although it is clear and concise, is not "the end of the issue." Neither is it a summary of the **WHOLE** of Catholic moral teaching on the death penalty. The church's universal norms always need to be applied in concrete circumstances. This means that the norms of our church may prevail in different ways in different situations.

In fact, the church itself has insisted that individual regions of the world consider and apply the universal teaching in ways appropriate to their regions. In his apostolic letter *Octogesima Adveniens*, for example, Pope Paul VI wrote: "In concrete situations, and taking account of solidarity in each person's life, one must recognize

a legitimate variety of possible options. The same Christian faith can lead to different commitments" (No. 50).

In our own country, the bishops of the United States first condemned the use of the death penalty in 1974. In what is recognized as their definitive statement on this matter, issued in November of 1980, the bishops cited their reasons for this condemnation. They stated that the death penalty "extinguishes the possibility of reform" (a logical statement from an institution that takes personal conversion and transformation as its very mission!), it involves the possibility of mistake, it would be exercised in a society that is often discriminatory against some members, and it is an action involving considerable terror.

Citing positive values to be realized by abolishing the death penalty, the bishops mentioned that its abolition would help break the cycle of violence in our society; send the message that we need not take life for life; and envisage a more humane and hopeful, effective response to the growth of violent crime.

The bishops based their position on careful research indicating that capital punishment, under present circumstances, "does not seem justified as a form of retribution, crime deterrence or reform" (*Origins*, 1980).

The bishops' statement acknowledges that "many citizens may believe that capital punishment should be

maintained as an integral part of our society's response to the evils of crime." Still, they insisted that correct appreciation of the Catholic tradition in our society demands the stance that they have taken on this matter. They state (in a passage at least as clear as the one cited from the catechism): "In the conditions of contemporary society, the legitimate purposes of punishment do not justify the imposition of the death penalty."

The letter to the editor and its citation of the paragraph from the catechism raise important aspects for all of us regarding the Catholic moral tradition. First, we must be careful not to make any *single* source of moral wisdom assume, by itself, the total weight of wisdom available on a particular moral question.

Second, we need to remind ourselves that all actions take place in concrete circumstances. The point of good, complete moral teaching is to help us move from the level of abstract norm to concrete application.

The author of the letter mentions his concern that "a great deal of confusion has arisen within the last 25 years concerning various moral issues." I believe Catholic moral education has erred more often in oversimplifying the moral life — reducing our moral understanding to a knowledge of abstract norms and failing to provide adult Catholics with a context that would enable them to move from abstract norm to concrete action.

*"Opposition to the teaching of the church's pastors cannot be seen as a legitimate expression either of Christian freedom or of the diversity of the Spirit's gifts."*

Pope John Paul II,  
'The Splendor of Truth'

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