

Thinking on issues can evolve

Dr. Patricia Schoelles, SSJ
Courier columnist

There is considerable discussion around the diocese these days about the death penalty. Many priests recently preached on the subject at Sunday liturgies, and parishioners were invited to sign petitions registering opposition to reinstating the death penalty in New York state.

Some parishioners objected to the priests preaching on this issue. Some claimed that by hearing a homily about this social, political and moral issue, they felt "forced" to adopt the homilist's view. My own reaction to listening to the homily I heard on that weekend was quite different from that perception.

I felt challenged and inspired to be part of a church that holds and proclaims a strong, rational and responsible position on a very important issue. I felt relieved about the fact that there is a clear teaching on this question and that the homilist I heard explained it so well. I thought that I now had a reference point against which to measure my own thinking about this very complicated issue.

I did not feel "forced" to wrench my thinking to coincide with the church's position or the preacher's reasoning. I did not think I had to deny my own thoughts or somehow



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negate my own thinking on the matter. (I don't know how to do that, anyway). I understood the event as a challenge to me to think with the church on this matter.

As Catholics, we are members of a community — the church — with certain "commonly accepted assumptions" about God, the world, ourselves, life and its meaning. We hold these assumptions in common, and they inform who we are, who we become, and how we think. For us, thinking about moral issues and informing our consciences are not solitary ventures. We do these things in

communion with one another. The origin of our Catholic moral teaching is this reality of our being a community.

Being a community entails certain obligations. One of these obligations is that we "presume" the correctness of the teachings of those whose duty it is to teach and guide us. The fact our leaders clearly explain a teaching to me, preach it to me and encourage me to accept it is not a matter of "being forced" to abandon the reasonable questions I may have about that teaching.

My own reactions to the issue of capital punishment occur at several levels of my personality. I suspect that this is true for many of us. While I have read our American bishops' statement on this matter, and while I agree with it at the level of my conscious thinking process, I know that historically the church has permitted the exercise of capital punishment in some circumstances. I also know that when I hear about a vicious crime or when someone close to me is a victim of a crime, I can react with a desire for vindication.

Many of us are honestly struggling to inform our consciences about the death penalty in our society. The conservative Catholic theologian Germain Grisez has summed up the evolution of Catholic thought on the death

penalty in this way:

"In the past, capital punishment sometimes may have seemed justified as a defensive measure ... Today, however, this defensive function plainly can be served in other ways. Thus, it is hardly possible to see how the use of the death penalty can be reconciled with Christian conceptions of human dignity and the sanctity of every human life ... It seems that Catholic thinking on capital punishment can develop as did the teaching on coercion in matters of religion and on slavery" (*The Way of the Lord Jesus: Vol II, Living a Christian Life*, Franciscan Press, 1993).

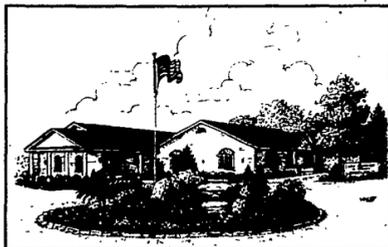
We should not be afraid of the development or evolution of our own thinking on given moral issues. We should not be afraid or resentful of those who challenge us from our pulpits. The thought of the church itself develops and undergoes transformation. The death penalty is a very difficult question, since it can seem to be a "solution" to the very real problem of escalating violence in our society.

I am grateful to be a member of a church that calls me to move beyond thinking death is an answer to the problems we have. I am grateful for homilies that address real issues about real life, and that dare to challenge the way I think and feel.

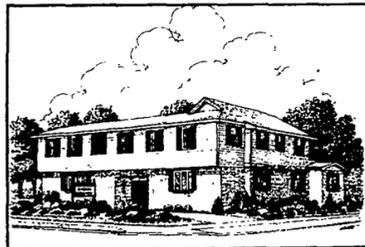
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