

Do we apply moral standards consistently?

By Rev. Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

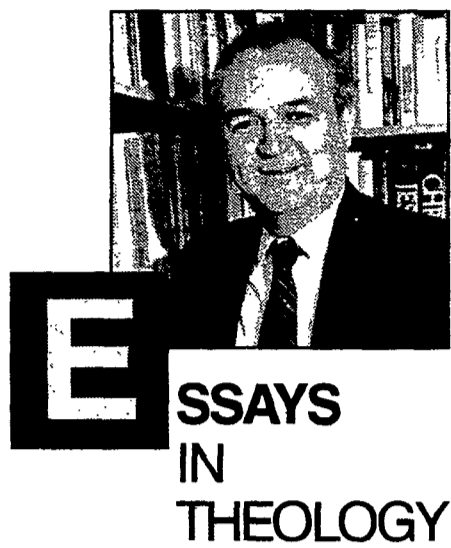
The loudest applause during New York Governor George Pataki's inaugural address in January erupted when he reminded the audience of his campaign pledge to restore the death penalty.

Politicians like Governor Pataki play the death-penalty card because it obviously touches such a responsive chord with the voters. His predecessor, Mario Cuomo, was rare among his breed: a politician who not only spoke strongly against the death penalty, but who also, year after year, vetoed bills passed by the New York State legislature designed to restore capital punishment.

Defenders of capital punishment claim that it is a deterrent to capital crime. In fact, that is the principal argument its proponents mount in its favor. The problem with the argument is that there is no convincing evidence to support it, and there is much evidence to the contrary.

For example, the murder rate in the State of New York, which still does not have the death penalty, is no greater than the murder rate in the State of Texas, which executes more people than any other state in the Union.

Furthermore, the infliction of the death penalty on a group that is preponderantly black and poor would suggest that, for advocates of capital punishment, only blacks and poor people are likely to be deterred by it.



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

On the other hand, the fact that few educated and well-to-do whites receive the death penalty would seem to suggest, for these same proponents, either that educated, well-to-do white people don't commit many capital crimes or that they are so fearless that they are beyond the reach of threats, even threats to their own lives.

We know, too, that more criminals are executed for killing white people than for killing black people. Is this because it is more important to prevent the murder of whites than of blacks? (Or is it perhaps the case that those who murder blacks are, like educated, well-to-do whites, beyond the power to deter?)

Although capital punishment is still listed in traditional Catholic sources, along with self-defense and the just

war, as a legitimate exercise of state authority, its moral support among bishops and theologians has been eroding steadily over the past two decades.

Individual bishops have urged their state's governors to grant clemency to prisoners awaiting execution, and so have entire state conferences, as in Florida. Pope John Paul II himself has intervened in more than one instance — Florida and Indiana come immediately to mind — to urge clemency.

The National Conference of Catholic Bishops in the United States issued two statements (in 1974 and 1980) calling for an end to capital punishment entirely. They addressed each argument brought forward in support of the death penalty, including deterrence, and rejected every one of them.

When the U.S. bishops in the 1980s developed their consistent ethic of life, or "seamless garment," approach to such life issues as abortion, war, child care, and the like, capital punishment was included on the list.

Using the bishops' own moral standard, no politician could receive a perfect pro-life score unless he or she opposed abortion and capital punishment alike.

Catholic politicians like Governor Cuomo always fell short because, while Cuomo opposed capital punishment, he was also pro-choice. For many bishops and anti-abortion activists, being pro-choice is morally equivalent to being pro-abortion.

Governor Cuomo, of course, paid a

high political price with his critics in the hierarchy and in the Catholic Church generally for failing to achieve a perfect score on his pro-life report card.

But what of his successor, a fellow Catholic? Governor Pataki is not only pro-capital punishment; he's also pro-choice. In those two life issues at least, Pataki earns a zero compared to Cuomo's 50 percent.

And to judge by the new governor's budget, it seems as if he's likely to earn few if any pluses by the bishops' consistent ethic-of-life standard.

It is puzzling, therefore, that we have heard nothing thus far from the Catholic bishops of New York State, and from their leader, Cardinal John J. O'Connor, about Governor Pataki's present political course.

It is true that the bishops had a meeting recently with the new governor to protest those of his budget cuts that will have their severest impact on the poor and the elderly. Barely two hours after the meeting, however, the Pataki budget went forward as planned.

EDITORS' NOTE: The New York State Catholic Conference and individual bishops did speak out against the death penalty. Bishop Matthew H. Clark and the Diocese of Rochester also participated in a state-wide education and petition effort opposing restoration of capital punishment in New York state. In conjunction with other church groups and area organizations, the diocese sent more than 15,000 petitions to Governor Pataki.

Christianity does not take away tragedy

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

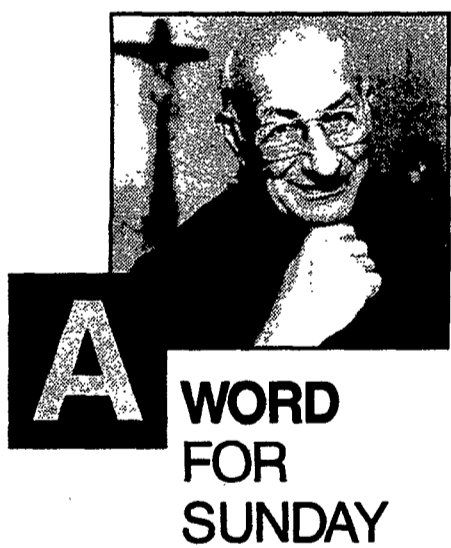
Sunday's Readings: (R3) Luke 13:1-9; (R1) Exodus 3:1-8, 13-15; (R2) 1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12.

During Lent, it is part of Christian tradition to focus on our sin and its consequences. Sunday's Gospel deals with that theme.

People came to Jesus asking about sin and its results. To their surprise Jesus turns their discussion of sin toward a call to repentance. The people assumed that the Galileans cut to death by Pilate's sword did something to deserve this evil. And that the people of Jerusalem crushed by a falling tower were also guilty of some sin.

One day I ran into a woman whose child had been struck by a rare, often fatal illness. "Your little boy may not make it," the doctor had told her. Seeing me, she sobbed. "Father, why did this happen to my little boy? What have we done to deserve this?" I could have said, "What did Jesus and Mary do to deserve their sufferings?" I did not. I just tried to console her by listening.

The people had asked Jesus the same question about those Galileans



A WORD FOR SUNDAY

whom Pilate had put to the sword and the people of Jerusalem killed by a natural disaster. And Jesus, so sensitive to human need, said, "I tell you, you will all come to the same end unless you reform."

So often we seek to see a correlation between good and evil. Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a best-selling book titled, "When Bad Things Happen to Good People." Thousands die

in Rwanda, in the Japan earthquake, in the Bosnia blood bath, and so on. How can God be good and still allow bad things like these to afflict good people like us?

First, Jesus lumps all violence and suffering together, whether it is caused by natural calamity or by human perversity. Evil is evil. Hurt is hurt.

Jesus refuses to answer the question of the correlation between good and evil. Instead, He responds, "Do you think these Galileans were the greatest sinners in Galilee ... or that those crushed by the falling tower were more guilty than anyone else who lived in Jerusalem? Certainly not! I tell you, you will all come to the same end unless you begin to reform."

Thornton Wilder's novel, "The Bridge of San Luis Rey," tells the story of a bridge that suddenly snaps and hurls six people to their deaths. The village priest said, "I will do research into these people's lives and show why those six people were on the bridge when it fell. I will prove beyond a doubt that if you do bad things, bad will happen to you and if you do good things, good will be done to you."

After his study, however, the priest

concluded: "Those six people were no worse, nor no better than anyone else in the village. God does allow the sun and the rain to fall upon the good and the bad alike."

The question is not about unfairness — how can bad things happen to good people like us? The question is not about justice — what do I deserve? No. The question is — how do I stand before God? That's the question. The notion that only good things happen to good people was put to rest when they nailed Jesus to the cross.

Augustine, in his "City of God," observed that when the barbarians raped, pillaged and sacked the city of Rome, Christians suffered just as much as pagans. Faith in Christ did not make them immune to pain and tragedy. Augustine wrote: "Christians differ from Pagans, not in the ills which befall them but in what they do with the ills that befall them."

Christianity does not take away tragedy; it shows us how to use it. The Father did not take the chalice of suffering away from Jesus, but sent an angel to help Him accept it and thus redeem the world. The people came to Jesus looking for answers to suffering. He told them to look for God.

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