

# COLUMNISTS

## Capital punishment deserves more thought

Recent executions in our country have resorted to methods used widely in former days: hanging and firing squads. Their use has focused renewed attention on capital punishment, and of course, rekindles the discussion within the Catholic community. We have gone over this ground before, but can easily benefit from rehearsing it one more time.

There has been theological support in the past for the use of the death penalty. This support has been based primarily on the strong emphasis that we have placed on the common good of the whole of society. Thus Catholics have based their support of capital punishment on the principle that the state must use its power to protect and preserve the common good of its citizens. When human life is directly assaulted, the state has the power to defend the lives of innocent citizens. If that defense can be conducted in no other way than through the execution of guilty parties, then defense of the common good permits the use of capital punishment.

More recently, however, other arguments have emerged to challenge our traditional support of the limited use of capital punishment. These arguments are reflected in Pope John Paul II's recent encyclical "On the Gospel of Life."



the  
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life

BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

In fact, the pope's rejection of capital punishment in that letter has led to plans to revise the section in *The New Catechism* that deals with this question.

The reconsideration of the death penalty by the pope and other Catholic thinkers, and by various bishops' conferences, is based on several arguments. One is the conviction that abolition of the death penalty can communicate that the cycle of violence needs to be, and can be, broken. Encouraging other forms of punishment is seen as both possible and logical when trying to uphold the position that violence and killing are wrong.

Another is that Catholics are trying to affirm a consistent ethic of life that is coherent in the face of all forms of violence and killing. Thus our opposition to abortion and euthanasia, and our de-

fense of human life based on the dignity of all are among our most important values. Opposition to the death penalty is seen as part of this ethic of life.

Scripture studies, too, have contributed to the rejection of capital punishment. Recent studies conclude that one of the distinctive marks of the ministry of Jesus is his strong opposition to all forms of violence and killing. He preached an ethic of mercy and can be seen even to reject capital punishment in some of his words and actions. Further, a church whose Savior endured the death penalty seems called to oppose its use.

Our doctrine of God's sovereignty over all is also used as a counter to the exercise of human power to exercise vengeance through the taking of life.

In their own statement on the use of capital punishment issued in 1980, the U.S. bishops addressed several additional points in their rejection of the death penalty. They cite the possibility that we will apply the death penalty in cases of mistaken judgment, and they dwell at some length on our potential for discrimination in our legal judgments. They maintain that today we have the ability to restrain evildoers without resorting to killing those who perpetrate evil. The bishops conclude that the evils

resulting from state killing outweigh the inconvenience and expense of incarcerating incorrigible criminals in other ways that can effectively restrain them.

The bishops, and others who comment on this issue, relate these major arguments opposing the death penalty to other conditions that prevail in our culture. They see our use of the death penalty more in line with these undesirable aspects of our culture than opposing them. These include the glorification of violence as a "quick solution" to problems, the access we have to guns and weapons, the poverty and racism that feed our well-developed propensity to violence.

This issue provides a unique example of changing positions within our moral and theological tradition. We have traditionally found justification for the use of the death penalty. Today many good arguments cause us — from the pope and bishops to many working in the penal system itself — to question the necessity for this form of punishment. We find some of the theological assumptions of the past to be inadequate to the situations we face today. This is an important issue that deserves our most careful, thoughtful consideration. To take a human life is without doubt the most serious of human actions.

## Catholic Press Month a time to reflect

Like many of the other 196 national and diocesan newspapers, and 274 magazines and newsletters that constitute the Catholic Press Association of the United States and Canada, the *Catholic Courier* is marking Catholic Press Month.

Last week, for example, we began a monthlong series of "house ads" describing the newspaper's various operations. This week's installment, on Page 2, introduces you to our editorial staff.

But I think Catholic Press Month also is an important time to consider the importance of the Catholic press in our diocese and around the world.

My trip last year to Lithuania, Poland and Slovakia taught me a great deal about that subject. The U.S. Catholic Conference sent our consulting team to Eastern Europe to nurture significant investments that had been made in establishing Catholic publications in those areas. Why? Because the bishops of Eastern Europe and of the United States



between  
the lines

BY KAREN M. FRANZ

believe a strong Catholic press is critical to the ongoing faith formation of those nations' Catholic adults, and to their ability to respond to social and political change from a faith perspective.

Does that belief hold true in the United States as well? Certainly U.S. Catholics always have enjoyed the constitutional freedom — long denied in Soviet-bloc nations — to worship and be educated in their faith. And our political and economic systems are well es-

tablished. Yet I see striking parallels.

The people of this diocese gathered in General Synod on Oct. 3, 1993, establishing lifelong faith formation as the diocese's No. 1 priority. Moreover, as discussed in the *Courier's* cover story this week, U.S. society is undergoing subtle yet significant economic, social and political transformation. Do we need the information, education and inspiration of the Catholic press any less than do our Eastern European sisters and brothers in faith? I think not.

Our Eastern Europe team was led by Archbishop John P. Foley, president of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Social Communication and former editor of *The Catholic Standard & Times*, newspaper of the Philadelphia Archdiocese. In a statement for Catholic Press Month, Archbishop Foley observed:

"Formation in the faith does not end with eighth grade or high school or college — or even graduate school. It does

not end with the latest Sunday homily. Formation in the faith is or should be an ongoing experience — and the Catholic press makes such continuing formation possible and even easy."

But you already read the *Catholic Courier*, so why am I "preaching to the choir?" Because you — as a "faithful reader" — can encourage others to take advantage of the Catholic press.

Give away copies of articles you enjoy. Check out your parish's reading rack. Point out the *Courier's* On the Move centerfold to teens, read our Kids' Chronicle with children, show our new parenting and young-adult features to others. Use our cover stories — and *U.S. Catholic*, *America*, *Our Sunday Visitor*, *Commonweal*, for example — in discussion groups.

As Archbishop Foley concluded, "Sometimes all you need is a little inspiration — and you unfailingly find it in the Catholic press. Read it — and pass it on. Other people need inspiration too!"

## COMING ATTRACTIONS

### PARENTING & FAMILY LIFE

Publication Date: March 21  
Adv. Deadline: March 7

Expanding on its monthly feature, the *Courier* will offer an in-depth look at raising Catholic children in the 1990 — including church teaching on such topics as discipline, faith development and education.



### LENTEN DINING

Published Feb. 14-April 7  
Adv. Deadlines: 10 days prior

Preparing meatless meals can exhaust anyone's culinary repertoire after a couple of weeks. Catholic *Courier* advertisers come to the cooks' rescue, offering great discounts on tasty treats from fish fries to veggie pizza.



### SPRING SPORTS & RECREATION

Publication Date: Apr. 4th  
Adv. Deadline: Mar. 21st

New to the *Courier* lineup of supplements, this section will serve as a "pre-game rally" for spring sports programs. In addition to previewing teams and schedules, it will highlight the religious aspect of athletics.



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