

WORLD & NATION

Church officials oppose execution of McVeigh

WASHINGTON (CNS) — The head of the U.S. bishops' Domestic Policy Committee was among Catholic leaders who argued that even Timothy McVeigh, convicted of the worst act of terrorism in U.S. history, should not be executed for his crimes.

"Our passions cry out for vengeance" for McVeigh's "massive destruction of human life," said Bishop William S. Skylstad of Spokane, Wash., chairman of the bishops' committee.

"However," he said, "we as bishops believe that to execute Mr. McVeigh would tragically perpetuate a terrible cycle of violence and further diminish respect for life ... We are called to seek justice without vengeance."

McVeigh, 29, was convicted in Denver June 2 on all 11 federal counts of conspiracy and murder brought against him for the April 1995 bombing that destroyed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City and killed 168 people.

The jury reconvened June 4 for the penalty phase, and were asked to decide whether he should be executed by lethal injection or spend life in prison without parole. Deliberations were still underway as of the *Catholic Courier's* deadline.

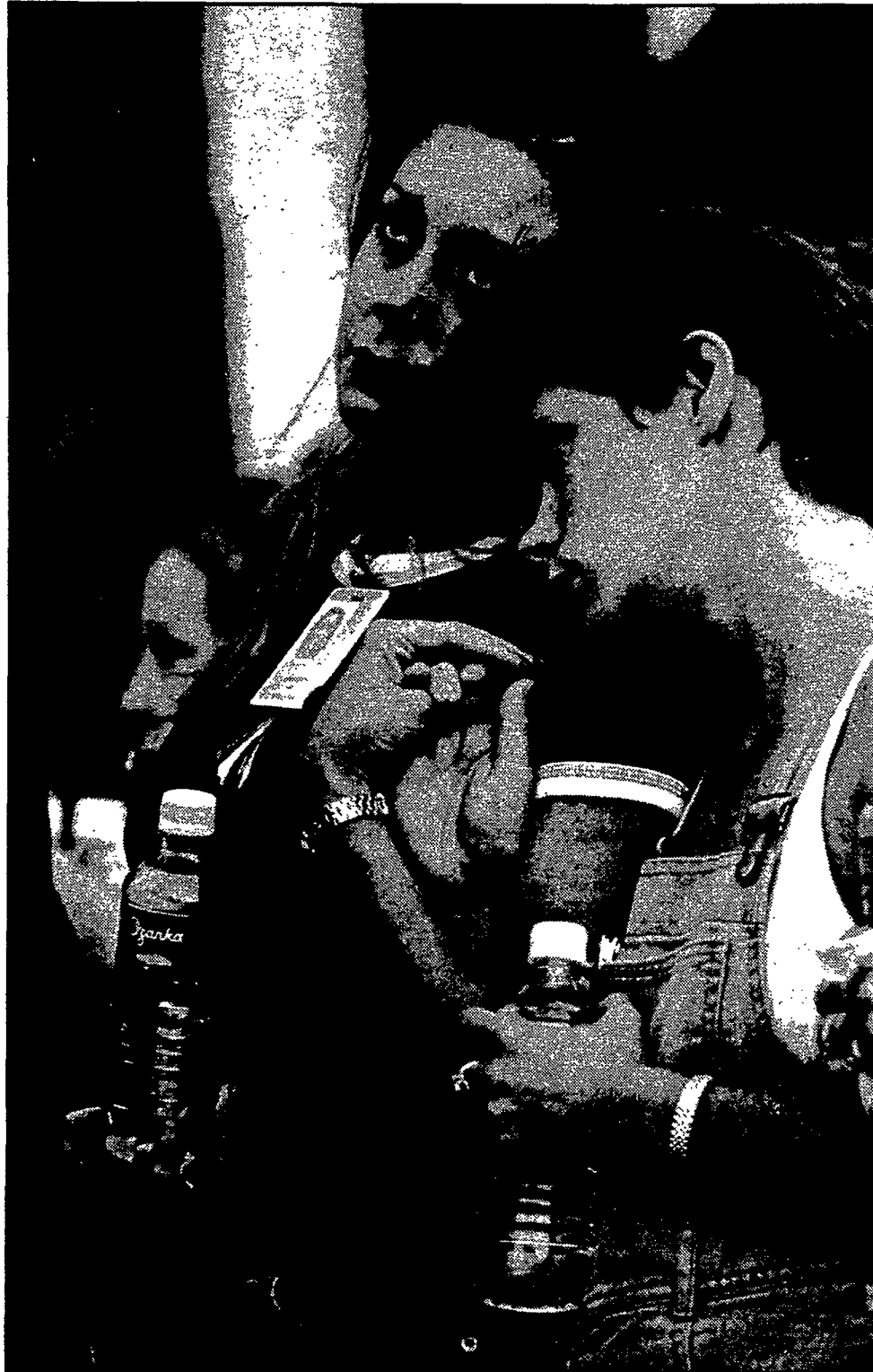
Bishop Skylstad said the bishops' thoughts and prayers remain with the survivors and the victims' families "as they and we relive that painful tragedy."

But he said even McVeigh's execution would not "truly ease the pain of those who have suffered so much. No act, including an execution, can fill the void and heal the wounds ... We do not believe that killing the person who killed so many of our sisters and brothers can teach society that killing is wrong."

Among others who opposed the death penalty was Denver's Archbishop Charles J. Chaput, who wrote about it in a column for the June 11 issue of his archdiocesan newspaper, the *Denver Catholic Register*.

He said that even if people ignore evidence that the death penalty does not deter crime and its use in the United States is discriminatory, the basic issue remains: "Killing the guilty is still wrong. It does not honor the dead. It does not ennoble the living."

The archbishop sharply criticized the



Sisters Jennifer Walker and Chelle Crossland, whose father, David Walker, was killed in the April 1996 Oklahoma City bombing, comfort each other at a prayer service June 2 at the "Survivor Tree" near the bomb site.

"circus-like indignity" in Denver following the guilty verdict, when a local radio station urged people to drive by the federal courthouse and honk if they wanted McVeigh executed — and some 24,000 Coloradans did.

"We need to put aside our anger for the sake of our children," he said. "And we need to reflect very carefully on the choices we make about the death penalty."

He added: "Executions in Texas could soon reach 50 a month, nearly two a day. Ponder that through the eyes of a young person reading the newspaper — or driving by a 'fry-the-killer' radio survey on the street. Is this how we define ourselves as a civilized people? Is this really a fitting monument to those who died?"

An editorial in *The Catholic Standard and Times*, Philadelphia archdiocesan newspaper, noted that the Catholic bishops of Pennsylvania, like those of other states, have repudiated use of the death penalty.

Despite the crimes he is convicted of, "Timothy McVeigh should not die," wrote the editor, Father Paul S. Quinter.

He noted that in 1987 the state's bishops urged full regard for the well-being of the victims of crimes and their families, including their "right to expect that the perpetrator will be punished justly and swiftly."

But the bishops also said concern for victims' rights "must avoid any demands for vengeance," he said.

"Winning justice for revenge's sake is a hollow victory at best that exacts too costly a price on us all," Father Quinter wrote.

As people relive the tragedy of the Oklahoma City bombing, "mercy seems unthinkable, and we lash out," wrote editor Jerry Ruff in the June 5 issue of the *Times Review*, diocesan newspaper of La Crosse, Wis.

"For God's sake, we cry, we are only human! Even Christ himself would have struggled to forgive such a man!" Ruff wrote.

"And maybe that's the place to begin," he commented, "to recognize that yes, even Christ, who wept at the death of Lazarus, who stormed through the temple money-changers, who cried out from the cross, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!' would have anguished at the act of evil and the man who committed it."

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