

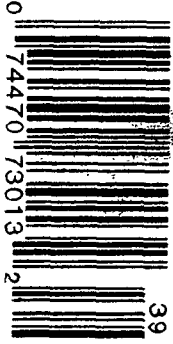
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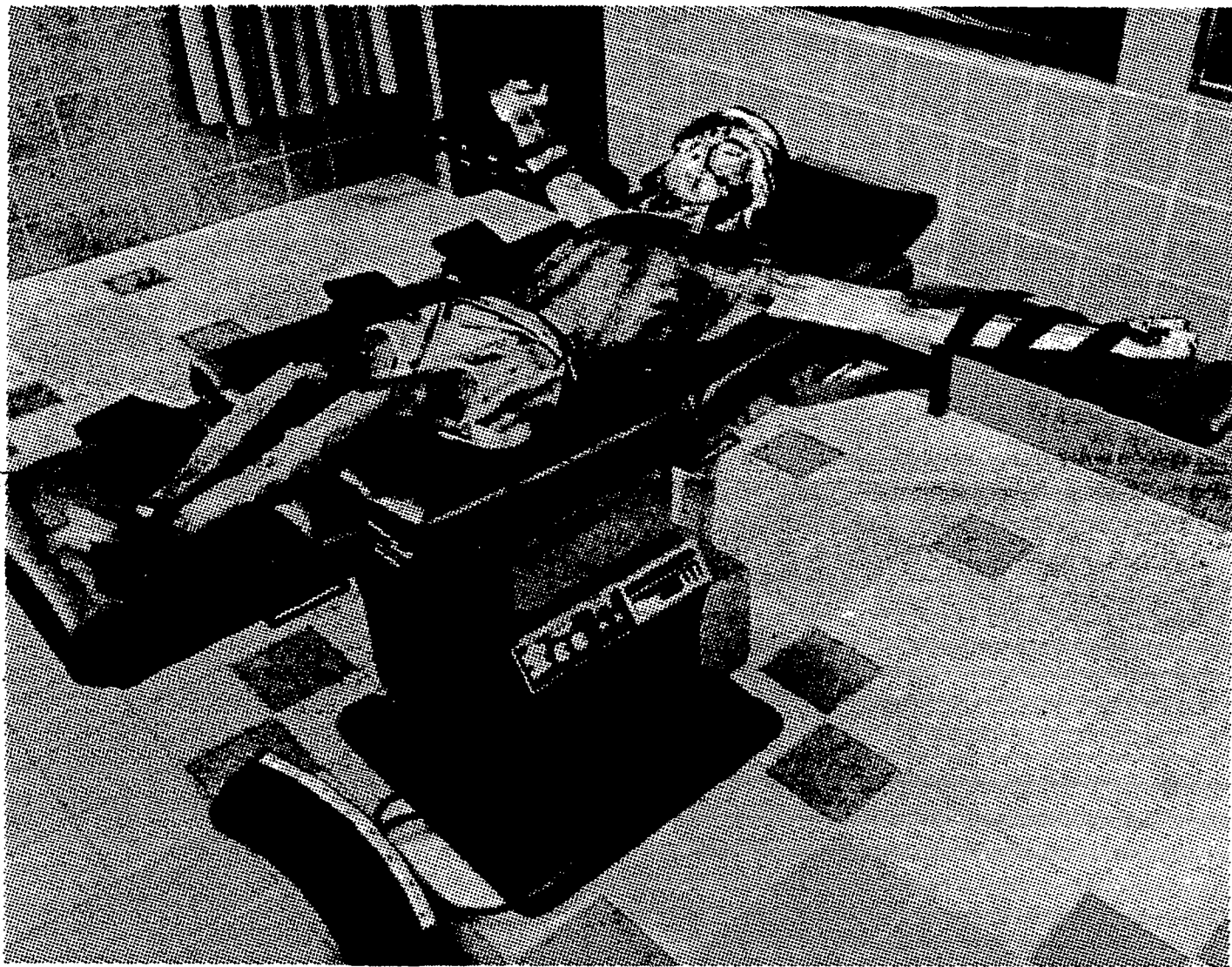


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Rejection of death penalty grows

Story by Associate editor Lee Strong • Photo illustration by Greg Francis & Zoe Maves



And when they came to the place called Golgotha (which means Place of the Skull), they gave Jesus wine to drink mixed with gall. But when he had tasted it, he refused to drink. And after they had crucified him, they divided his garments by casting lots; then they sat down and kept watch over him there."

Thus begins Matthew's account of one of the most famous instances of capital punishment in human history: a legal act, carried out by legitimate authority on a condemned criminal.

Thus began, also, "the strange history of Christian involvement with this practice," as it is described by James Megivern in his 1997 book, *The Death Penalty: An Historical and Theological Survey*.

That history includes a gradual acceptance of the death penalty as an instrument of state — and sometimes the church, "the only case in Catholic moral theology where the direct destruction of human life was sanc-

tioned by the Roman Catholic Church," Megivern explained in a telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier*. He spoke from the University of North Carolina, Wilmington, where he teaches in the religion and philosophy department.

But it is also a history that includes the more recent rapid rejection of the death penalty by church leaders.

The latest instance of rejection came Sept. 8 when Pope John Paul II promulgated the definitive Latin text of the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

The entire definitive text includes approximately 100 changes made since the catechism was initially released in 1992. One of the most dramatic changes came in the section dealing with the death penalty.

The 1992 catechism said, "The traditional teaching of the church has acknowledged as well-founded the right and duty of legitimate public author-

ity to punish malefactors by means of penalties commensurate with the gravity of the crime, not excluding, in cases of extreme gravity, the death penalty."

The revision, however, incorporates Pope John Paul's judgment from his 1995 encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae*, that, with the resources and possibilities available to governments today for restraining criminals, "the cases in which the execution of the offender is an absolute necessity 'are very rare, if not practically nonexistent.'"

Analysts and theologians point out that, in effect, the official church teaching is that there is no valid reason for using the death penalty in nations such as the United States.

A useful change

Death penalty foes have enthusiastically greeted the catechism revisions.

Suzanne Schnittman, consistent life ethic coordinator for the Diocese of

Rochester, noted that it gives death penalty foes an added tool.

"It give us one more weight on the balance scale for life," she said. "It will help us because people who challenge us (on this issue) use the catechism."

Sister Helen Prejean, CSJ, author of *Dead Man Walking*, told Catholic News Service that the changes underscore church opposition to the death penalty as it is administered, particularly in the United States.

"We have had Catholic judges up and down our judicial system who have stood on the tradition of the Catholic Church to validate their opinion of the death penalty," Sister Prejean said. "Now we have the church saying it's time to end this ... you are not to take life for life."

Meanwhile, on behalf of the United States bishops, Bishop William S. Skylstad of Spokane, Wash., released a statement in which he praised the Latin edition of the catechism for its stronger emphasis on Catholic teaching against the death penalty.

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