

COLUMNISTS

Pope takes prophetic stance on death penalty

The teachings of Pope John Paul II have something both to please and to challenge most Catholics.

Catholics for whom issues of sexual behavior, gender equality and human reproduction are paramount bestow the highest marks on this pope's voluminous moral teachings. Other Catholics for whom the papal teachings on birth control, women's ordination and inclusive language in the liturgy are unpalatable nevertheless praise the pope for his prophetic social teachings on immigration, on the obligations of governments toward the poor and the powerless, on the forgiveness of Third World debts, and the like.

Until recently, the epithet "cafeteria Catholic" has been attached only to those Catholics in the latter category, namely, those who disagree with the pope's teachings on sexual ethics, while embracing his teachings on social justice and human rights. It has been said that such Catholics "pick and choose" from an assortment of teachings on the papal table.

However, it has become clear in recent years — and long before the pope made his triumphant stopover in St. Louis — that so-called liberal Catholics are not the only ones in the "cafeteria" line. No issue makes this clearer than capital punishment.



BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

essays in theology

The media reported the starkly different reactions from the throng of some 100,000 Catholic worshippers in the Trans World Dome as the pope listed components of the "culture of death."

Abortion? It belongs at the top of the list. Contraception? Why not? Euthanasia? Absolutely. Assisted suicide? Take that, Dr. Kevorkian! All to enthusiastic applause.

The death penalty? The congregation became suddenly quiet. The applause, polite at best, was totally different from what had greeted the pope's words on abortion and the other instruments of death within our culture.

But the pope did not leave well enough alone. He also personally appealed to the governor of Missouri, Mel Carnahan, to commute the sentence of a prisoner awaiting execution by lethal injection.

This was no ordinary sell. The governor is a staunch advocate of capital punishment and a Protestant to boot. Moreover, the prisoner who was slated to die in just two weeks is nothing like the woman in Texas, for example, whose values had allegedly changed for the better since her involvement in a brutal murder while still a youth. In spite of many appeals for her life, her execution went forward.

The murderer on whose behalf the pope appealed had waited in hiding for three days, wearing camouflage and face paint, for his victims. Then he ambushed them as they came down the path: a 69-year-old man who was, according to authorities, the killer's former drug partner, the man's 56-year-old wife, and the couple's 19-year-old grandson, a paraplegic.

According to reports in the *New York Times*, the killer blasted all three with a shotgun from about 30 feet away and then, for good measure, shot each one directly in the face and mutilated their bodies.

Even the killer's defense attorney was surprised by the governor's decision to commute the sentence in direct response to the pope's appeal. "Quite frankly," he said, "this case was probably one of the weaker clemency cases ... there were no real claims of mental illness, no question of guilt. It was a triple murder." The lawyer

indicated that he could name "lots of others," including those already executed, who were much more sympathetic candidates for clemency.

For centuries the Catholic Church has regarded capital punishment as one of the three morally legitimate reasons for taking another's life, the other two being self-defense and a just war.

In the decades following the Second Vatican Council, however, the Catholic theological tide gradually began to flow against the moral legitimacy of capital punishment. With the encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae* ("The Gospel of Life") in 1995, papal authority itself was directed against the death penalty.

In that encyclical John Paul II pointed out that, while there might be circumstances in which capital punishment would be necessary to defend society, those instances are "rare if not practically non-existent."

The wildly applauding crowd in the Trans World Dome was obviously unprepared for the pope's prophetic word on capital punishment. Perhaps, like most Catholics, they hadn't read *Evangelium Vitae*.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

Our 'mountain visions' lead us to serve others

Second Sunday of Lent: (R3) Matthew 17:1-9. (R1) Genesis 12:1-4. (R2) 2 Timothy 1:8-10.

Moses and Elijah are two of the most influential men who ever lived. Their stories are told in all the three great world religions: Judaism, Islam and Christianity.

Moses was the man who received the Ten Commandments from God. He represents the Law. Elijah was a prophet of heroic proportions. He withstood the wicked King Ahab and his evil wife Jezebel. He represents the prophets. It is significant that when the disciples saw Jesus in his transfiguration, Moses and Elijah appeared to them. It was to teach them that Jesus was he who fulfilled the Law and the prophets.

We know the story. Jesus took Peter, James and John up a high mountain by themselves. On the mountain he was transfigured: His face shone like the sun and his clothes became white as light. Then Moses and Elijah appeared talking to Jesus. Peter exclaimed to Jesus, "Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish I will make three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

While Peter was speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom



BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

a word for sunday

I am well pleased; listen to him." When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground in fear. But Jesus touched them saying, "Be not afraid." And when they looked up they saw Jesus was alone. As they came down the mountain, Jesus ordered them to tell the vision to no one till he had been raised from the dead.

The Transfiguration confirms many truths of our faith.

First, it confirms that Jesus is true God and true man. On the mountain, he let the glory of his divinity shine through the cloud of his humanity.

The Transfiguration also tells us that there is a communion of saints, that the saints in heaven are concerned about us on earth. Moses and Elijah talked to Jesus about his coming death and resurrection

not only to encourage him but to strengthen the faith of the disciples.

The Transfiguration was only a passing experience meant to carry them through the scandal of the cross. So too, our religious experiences are often ephemeral, a tiny wisp of glory, a touch, a tasting of God's presence in our soul, given to sustain us across the Calvary periods of life. Eternity breaks into our lives for a moment and then recedes, and we find ourselves back in the real world, just as the disciples did. But we need never fear, for if we look up we shall see that Jesus is always there.

In the Christian life there are two dimensions: the mount of vision and the valley of service. The mount of vision is where we encounter God: at Mass, at prayers, in our devotions. The valley is our return to everyday life, where, strengthened and refreshed by the vision, we love and serve those hurting and in need.

TV host Merv Griffin was interviewing Charlton Heston. Heston played Moses in "The Ten Commandments." Griffin asked Heston if playing Moses changed his spiritual outlook on life. Heston thought for a moment, then simply said, "Well, Merv, you can't walk barefoot down Mount Sinai and be the same person you were when you went up."

An authentic mountaintop experience with God through the Mass, through prayer, through devotions cannot but change us. These experiences will open our eyes and help us to see the world as God sees it: a world with others in need of love and service. Thus at the conclusion of the Mass, the priest might say, "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord" — to love the Lord by serving his people and to serve the Lord by loving his people.

Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

Daily Readings

Monday, March 1

Daniel 9:4-10; Luke 6:36-38

Tuesday, March 2

Isaiah 1:10, 16-20; Matthew 23:1-12

Wednesday, March 3

Jeremiah 18:18-20; Matthew 20:17-28

Thursday, March 4

Jeremiah 17:5-10; Luke 16:19-31

Friday, March 5

Genesis 37:3-4, 12-13, 17-28;

Matthew 21:33-43, 45-46

Saturday, March 6

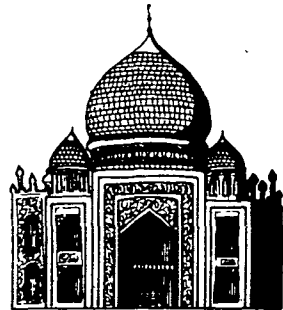
Micah 7:14-15, 18-20; Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

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