

COLUMNISTS

Death penalty makes us the killers we hate

We've read that the governor of Illinois has issued a moratorium on the death penalty in his state. He did this because over 50 percent of those sentenced to death in Illinois were eventually exonerated, and he thinks the process by which some prisoners are given the death penalty needs revision.

I've covered the death penalty several times already in this column. I've repeated over and over reasons why Pope John Paul II and the American bishops have come out against the death penalty. I've quoted the 1995 encyclical, *Evan-gelium Vitae*, which states "...the cases in which the execution of the offender is an absolute necessity 'are very rare, if not practically nonexistent.'" I've cited Cardinal Ratzinger who has stated, "It seems to me it would be very difficult to meet the conditions (for use of the death penalty) today."

The American bishops have named several reasons for rejecting the death penalty. Among them they have included the possibility that we will apply the death penalty in cases where we have judged the prisoner mistakenly. They describe ways in which discrimination against some classes and races of Americans can increase our potential for mistaken judgments. The bishops further maintain that as a society we have the means to restrain even our most hardened murderers without resorting to killing them. The bishops advance an argument that concludes that the evil of state killing outweighs the inconve-



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By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

nience and expense of keeping incorrigible criminals restrained and imprisoned.

All of these points are well-made. They are also well known by many of us. They are consistent with the strong stand in our own diocese in favor of "the consistent life ethic." For most of us, there are moments when we ruminate in our heads about the use of death penalty. We might hear, for example, of a heinous crime committed against an innocent person and wonder whether the death penalty isn't the best solution for the one who committed such a deed. We might get to a point of speculating that executing those found guilty of murder or other grievous crimes is actually better for society in the long run. It may seem a more efficient, safer, and expedient solution than trying to isolate and contain such individuals.

I think, however, that the action taken by the governor of Illinois causes us to consider a slightly different "angle" on the death penalty that might challenge

some of our thoughts about the efficiency and necessity of the death penalty.

Along these lines, I think that the use of capital punishment says less about the criminal than it does about those of us who use it. It surely is the case that certain people do perform inhuman and abominable actions against others. It surely is the case that some people violate the rights of innocent others. It is absolutely the case that innocent children, women and men have suffered undeservedly at the hands of others, for no reason at all. Our fellow citizens have lost their lives because of the deviance of others. Perhaps someone we know has been the victim of crime, or has lost a loved one through an act of murder.

It is likely that the relatives of murdered people will be affected by such an action for the rest of their lives. All of this is indeed evil, and its cause can be laid right at the feet of those who commit these horrible crimes.

But my proposition this morning is that using the death penalty can't change any of that. Using the death penalty isn't even an effective deterrent to crime, as the most responsible studies conducted to date have shown. The law of "an eye for an eye" does not heal the wounds of surviving loved ones; it does not vindicate the life or death of murdered victims; it does not free society from its fear of crime and violence.

In fact, employing the death penalty may make a profound statement about

those of us who use it. We as a society seem to be saying that at times it is OK to kill. Killing another is justified after all. For certain reasons, we all have to kill — if the occasion is serious enough and the reason valid enough.

But that reasoning can be used by criminals, too. Their reasons for killing just happen to be different ones. When someone is vicious enough, we have to kill them. Killing human beings is OK after all — our needs make it so.

I think we need to question this kind of assumption because of what it says about us and what it does to us as a society. As we continue to exercise the death penalty, aren't we in danger of becoming more and more a people who understand and use killing one another as a solution for all sorts of problems? If we find another person to be evil enough, it's OK to kill them. If we find another person inconvenient enough (as with abortion for example), it's OK to kill them. If we find another person sick enough or suffering enough, it's OK to kill them.

Using this line of reasoning, don't we actually become the people for whom the approved solution to evil, the approved solution to inconvenience, the approved solution to suffering, is killing? Is that really the identity that we, as Christian people or as a nation, want to assume?

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Sister Schoelles is president of St. Bernard's Institute.

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