

# COLUMNISTS

## Buchanan misses the boat on capital punishment

Catholics who received their catechetical instruction before the Second Vatican Council may recall being taught that there are three conditions under which a human life can be taken: self-defense, a just war and capital punishment.

Catholicism still holds to the just-war tradition in spite of the recent emergence of a pacifist movement within the church. However, the development of weapons of mass destruction provoked a radical reassessment of the moral conditions under which any war can be undertaken, as the U.S. Catholic bishops pointed out in their 1983 pastoral letter, "The Challenge of Peace."

Attitudes toward capital punishment began to change after the Second World War when most Western societies completely abolished it or drastically restricted its use. In spite of popular support for capital punishment in the United States, the nation's Catholic bishops issued a strong statement in opposition to it in 1980, rejecting the argument that it is as a deterrent to violent crime.

In 1995 Pope John Paul II all but ruled it out as a moral option in his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* ("The Gospel of Life"). "There is a growing tendency, both in the Church and in civil society," he wrote, "to demand that it be applied in a very



BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

essays in theology

limited way or even that it be abolished completely."

Since the state has the capacity to prevent a killer from doing further harm, "the cases in which the execution of the offender is an absolute necessity are very rare, if not ... non-existent" (n. 56). The pope's teaching is included in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (n. 2267).

The issue has resurfaced with the death sentence of Timothy McVeigh. His execution has been postponed until this month after documents relevant to the case were belatedly discovered and determined to have been withheld from McVeigh's defense lawyers by the FBI.

Two well-known Catholic laymen debated the issue on NBC's "Meet the Press." Former talk-show host Phil Donahue argued vigorously against the exe-

cution, citing the recent change in the Catholic Church's teaching on capital punishment. (Pope John Paul II had appealed to President Bush to commute McVeigh's sentence to life in prison.)

Patrick Buchanan, also a well-known television personality and sometime candidate for president of the United States, challenged Mr. Donahue's point.

"There are two sources of truth in the Catholic Church," he said, "scripture and tradition. Scripture authorizes the death penalty, virtually mandates it. (Church tradition) has held that it is valid punishment for 1,900, 2,000 years now."

"The pope's personal opinion, which ought to be respected, ... is to intervene and ask that the execution not be carried out," Buchanan continued. "You should respect that opinion but the teaching of the Catholic Church, Aquinas and Augustine, which the pope himself cannot change, authorizes the death penalty."

There are two aspects of Buchanan's remarks which are of particular theological interest here: first, that the church's teaching on capital punishment prior to the mid-20th century was infallible, that is, not subject to error and therefore immutable; and, second, that John Paul II's teaching on capital punishment is only a matter of "personal opinion."

Regarding the first aspect, I know of no Catholic theologian — or bishop — who holds that the earlier teaching on capital punishment was infallible. Had it been infallible teaching, no pope could change it and would be guilty of a grave malfeasance if he attempted to do so.

Regarding the second aspect, it is remarkable that Mr. Buchanan should dismiss a teaching in a papal encyclical as a matter of the pope's "personal opinion." Buchanan is, after all, closely associated with that segment of the U.S. Catholic community that tends to equate orthodoxy with an unquestioning acceptance of every papal teaching.

Such an attitude contradicts Pope Pius XII's own teaching (heretofore highly popular with readers of *The Wanderer*, where Buchanan's columns have frequently appeared) that what is expounded in an encyclical pertains to Catholic doctrine; moreover, the matter "cannot be any longer considered a question open to discussion among theologians" — or Catholic television personalities (*Humani Generis*, n. 29).

"Cafeteria Catholicism," it would seem, is also alive and well on the right.

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

## Happiness is the gift of the Trinity

Trinity Sunday (June 10): (R3) John 16:12-15; (R1) Proverbs 8:22-31; (R2) Romans 5:1-5.

The doctrine of the Trinity means that in the one God there are three divine persons. One person is the Father, who is eternal life. One person is the son, who is eternal truth. And a third person is the Holy Spirit, who is eternal love.

Pagans used to object to monotheism on the grounds that if God were one God, he was alone; alone, he was lonely; lonely, he was not happy. The Trinity dispels this objection. Our God is a happy God. He created us to share his happiness with us.

The mystery of the doctrine of the Trinity lies in the processions. How can the Son proceed from the Father and the Holy Spirit proceed from the Father and the Son and yet all are equal? That's the mystery.

A mystery is a truth that we cannot fully understand. But it is revealed to us so that we can drink from the mystery many, many truths.

First, the mystery of the Trinity affords us an opportunity to make an act of faith. We lost paradise through a lack of faith. Our first parents believed the devil instead of God. So God willed that par-



BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

a word for sunday

adise be regained by acts of faith. Still, many are nibbling at the forbidden fruit: they will not accept the church's teachings, especially on moral matters. Like our first parents, they feel they can determine their own code of morality. They prefer to listen to the devil.

Secondly, the Trinity makes clear the goodness of God and his love for us.

God was perfectly happy. He didn't need us. Why did he create us then? To share with us his happiness. God made us as the objects upon whom he could confer his blessings. Thus, in the judgment, Christ will say to the good, "Come, blessed of my Father, receive the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

The crosses, problems and pains of

life come not from a good God but from bad people. And God permits these in order to draw good from them for us.

Thirdly, the Trinity exemplifies what we ought to be. God is a community of loving persons. Man is to image God by forming a community of loving persons. Thus the very first thing God did in the earthly paradise was to institute marriage. Man and woman were to become one and fill the earth. The family is one as God is one. It, too, has a father, who, like God the Father, is to be the giver of life, support and protection. It has a mother, like the Holy Spirit, who is to be the heart of the home, radiating love and affection to husband and children. And children, who are to imitate God the Son, by loving their parents and being obedient to them.

Fourthly, the Trinity makes us realize something of what heaven will be like. Heaven is not a glorified church service. Heaven is happiness. The least common denominator of happiness is life, truth and love. Everybody wants these three elements of happiness. And they seek them in a person.

But no human person can make us perfectly happy, for no human being can give us all the life, love and truth our

hearts desire. Only God can. For heaven means being wedded to a Father, who can give us eternal life; a Son, who can give us all truth; and a Holy Spirit, who can give us all the love our hearts will ever desire. In a word, everlasting happiness.

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

### Daily Readings

- Monday, June 11**  
Acts 11:21B-26, 13:1-3;  
Matthew 5:1-12
- Tuesday, June 12**  
2 Corinthians 1:18-22;  
Matthew 5:13-16
- Wednesday, June 13**  
2 Corinthians 3:4-11;  
Matthew 5:17-19
- Thursday, June 14**  
2 Corinthians 3:15-4:1, 3-6;  
Matthew 5:20-26
- Friday, June 15**  
2 Corinthians 4:7-15; Matthew 5:27-32
- Saturday, June 16**  
2 Corinthians 5:14-21;  
Matthew 5:33-37

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