

COLUMNISTS

Pro-life advocates should oppose death penalty

The execution of the Oklahoma City bomber, Timothy McVeigh, on June 11 provoked an avalanche of commentary — from victims, politicians, and pundits alike. There were even occasional references to the teaching of the Catholic Church.

A Catholic Rip Van Winkle who had been asleep for the past few decades would have been astonished to hear fellow Catholics telling reporters that they were against the execution "as a matter of conscience" because their church was opposed to capital punishment.

Not so many years ago, just about every Catholic parochial school product could have recited the three conditions under which the taking of a human life could be morally justified: self-defense, a just war and capital punishment. The third dropped off the moral wagon somewhere along the way.

The U.S. Catholic bishops signaled a dramatic change in the church's approach to capital punishment in a pastoral statement issued in 1980. They challenged the still commonly accepted view that capital punishment serves as a deterrent to murder.

But the decisive blow to the common teaching in support of capital punishment came in 1995 with Pope John Paul II's encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae* ("The Gospel of Life"). In that document the



essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

pope echoed a favorite expression of the late Cardinal John J. O'Connor, archbishop of New York, that ours has become a "culture of death." The pope offered an alternative vision based on the Gospel, namely, a "culture of life."

These two expressions have since been taken up by others, including President George W. Bush as he continues his intense courting of the Catholic vote. The difficulty for President Bush and politically like-minded individuals is that the pope's idea of a "culture of death" encompasses not only abortion and euthanasia, but also capital punishment.

The pope notes that there is "a growing tendency, both in the Church and in civil society, to demand that [the death penalty] be applied in a very limited way or even that it be abolished completely" (n. 56).

Citing The Catechism of the Catholic

Church (n. 2266), the encyclical points out that the primary purpose of society's punishment of a criminal is "to redress the disorder caused by the offense." Public authority redresses the violation of personal and social rights by imposing on the offender "an adequate punishment for the crime, as a condition for the offender to regain the exercise of his or her freedom" (*Evangelium Vitae*, n. 56).

By such punishment, the public order is defended, the people's safety is insured, and the offender is given an "incentive and help to change his or her behavior and be rehabilitated."

The encyclical continues: "It is clear that for these purposes to be achieved, the nature and extent of the punishment must be carefully evaluated and decided upon, and ought not to go to the extreme of executing the offender except in cases of absolute necessity: in other words, when it would not be possible otherwise to defend society."

"Today, however, as a result of steady improvements in the organization of the penal system, such cases are very rare if not practically nonexistent."

Would the pope have regarded the execution of Timothy McVeigh as one of those "very rare" instances where "absolute necessity" was involved, that is, to the point where "it would not be possible otherwise to defend society?"

One does not have to speculate about the pope's answer to that question. John Paul II personally appealed to President Bush to commute McVeigh's sentence to life in prison. The president rejected that appeal.

To be sure, Mr. Bush was not alone in his disagreement with the pope's stand against capital punishment. A professor of political science at Marquette University, a major Catholic institution, told the press just before the execution: "Clearly the anti-death-penalty people are thrown on the defensive by the obvious fact that it looks to everyone that McVeigh deserves to die." "Everyone," that is, except the pope.

"This reminds some people," Professor John McAdams continued, "that there are some crimes for which the only appropriate and just punishment is execution." But according to Pope John Paul II, this is not one of them.

One suspects that Professor McAdams considers himself pro-life and an admirer of John Paul II, whose 1991 encyclical *Centesimus Annus* is required reading in one of his courses. On this important life issue, however, neither Professor McAdams nor President Bush is in line with the teaching of the pope and the Catholic Church.

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

Love of God must include love of neighbor

15th Sunday of the Year (July 15): (R3) Luke 10:25-37; (R1) Deuteronomy 30:10-14; (R2) Colossians 1:15-20.

Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen in his autobiography, *Treasure in Clay*, tells of a visit he made to a leper colony in Buluba, Africa. He intended to give a silver crucifix to each of the 500 lepers residing in Buluba.

The first person who came forward, however, was a man so disfigured by the ravages of leprosy that Sheen was repulsed by the sight. The man's left arm was eaten off at the elbow by the disease; so he extended his right hand. This hand, too, was unspeakably corrupted by this awful disease.

Unable to bear the leper's presence, Sheen held the crucifix above the man's palm and dropped it, where it was immediately swallowed up in the decaying flesh. Instantly, Sheen realized how unChristlike was his action. Overcome with remorse, Sheen dug his fingers into the man's leprous hand and removed the crucifix. This time, he gently placed the crucifix in the man's hand. Sheen then respectfully handed a crucifix to each of the remaining 499 lepers and, in the exchange, learned to love them.

"And who is my neighbor?" a lawyer asked Jesus. Jesus answered his question with a parable. A man was going from Jerusalem to Jericho, a 17-mile trip. He fell among robbers who stripped him and beat him and left him for dead. A priest and a Levite passed him by. The



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

hero of the story was a Samaritan, shocking to Jesus' listeners. Relations between Jews and Samaritans were so strained that it was surprising that a Samaritan would offer assistance and equally as surprising that a Jewish man would accept the help. So Jesus answered the man's question by asking, "Which of the three was neighbor to the man?" The answer was obvious, "The one who treated him with compassion." Then Jesus challenged him and all of us, "Go and do the same."

This story calls us to well-doing. It reminds us that kindness and decency are possible in the world.

When Edgar Guest, the American poet and writer, was a young man, his first child died. Guest wrote: "There came a tragic night when our first baby was taken from us. I was lonely and defeated. There didn't seem to be anything in life ahead of me that mattered very much. I had to go to my neighbor's drugstore the next morning for something, and he mo-

tioned for me to step behind the counter with him. I followed him into his little office at the back of the store. He put both hands on my shoulders and said, 'Eddie, I can't really express what I want to say, the sympathy I have in my heart for you. All I can say is that I'm sorry, and I want you to know that if you need anything at all, come to me. What is mine is yours.'"

Years later, Edgar Guest reminisced upon that incident. He said, "Just a neighbor across the way — a passing acquaintance. Jim Potter (the druggist) may long since have forgotten that moment when he gave me his hand and his sympathy, but I shall never forget it — never in all my life. To me it stands out like the silhouette of a lonely tree against a crimson sunset."

Kindness and decency are possible in our world. We must remember this. They are the essential ingredients of a follower of Jesus.

A lawyer had asked Jesus, "What must I do to inherit everlasting life?" Jesus replied, "Love God ... and love your neighbor as yourself."

The priest and the Levite in our Lord's parable no doubt loved God. They were probably returning from doing their religious duties at the temple in Jerusalem. But just doing our religious duties is not enough. Love of God must include love of neighbor. It must include doing good to others — with no expectation of a reward. It is about following the example of a good Samaritan. It means

acting with kindness and decency. Of course we all know that, but we need to be reminded. We need to renew our sensitivity to the needs of the people we encounter. We need to be reminded that kindness and decency are possible in our world and are often needed. They are what the followers of Jesus should practice, for all people are God's children.

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Daily Readings

- Monday, July 16**
Exodus 1:8-14, 22; Psalms 124:1-8; Matthew 10:34-11:1
- Tuesday, July 17**
Exodus 2:1-15A; Psalms 69:3, 14, 30-31, 33-34; Matthew 11:20-24
- Wednesday, July 18**
Exodus 3:1-6, 9-12; Psalms 103:1-4, 6-7; Matthew 11:25-27
- Thursday, July 19**
Exodus 3:13-20; Psalms 105:1, 5, 8-9, 24-27; Matthew 11:28-30
- Friday, July 20**
Exodus 11:10-12:14; Psalms 146:12-13, 15-18; Matthew 12:1-8
- Saturday, July 21**
Exodus 12:37-42; Psalms 136:1, 23-24, 10-15; Matthew 12:14-21

Watch for the Education Issue

Publication date: August 16 · Advertising deadline: August 9

Our annual education edition is exceptionally popular among readers — drawing high interest, praise and peer awards. This back-to-school study of trends and developments covers educational topics ranging from kindergarten to the continuing education of adults. It's a great opportunity to showcase everything from