

Catholic Courier

DIocese of Rochester, New York

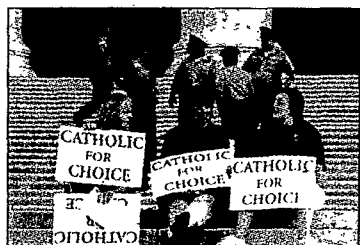
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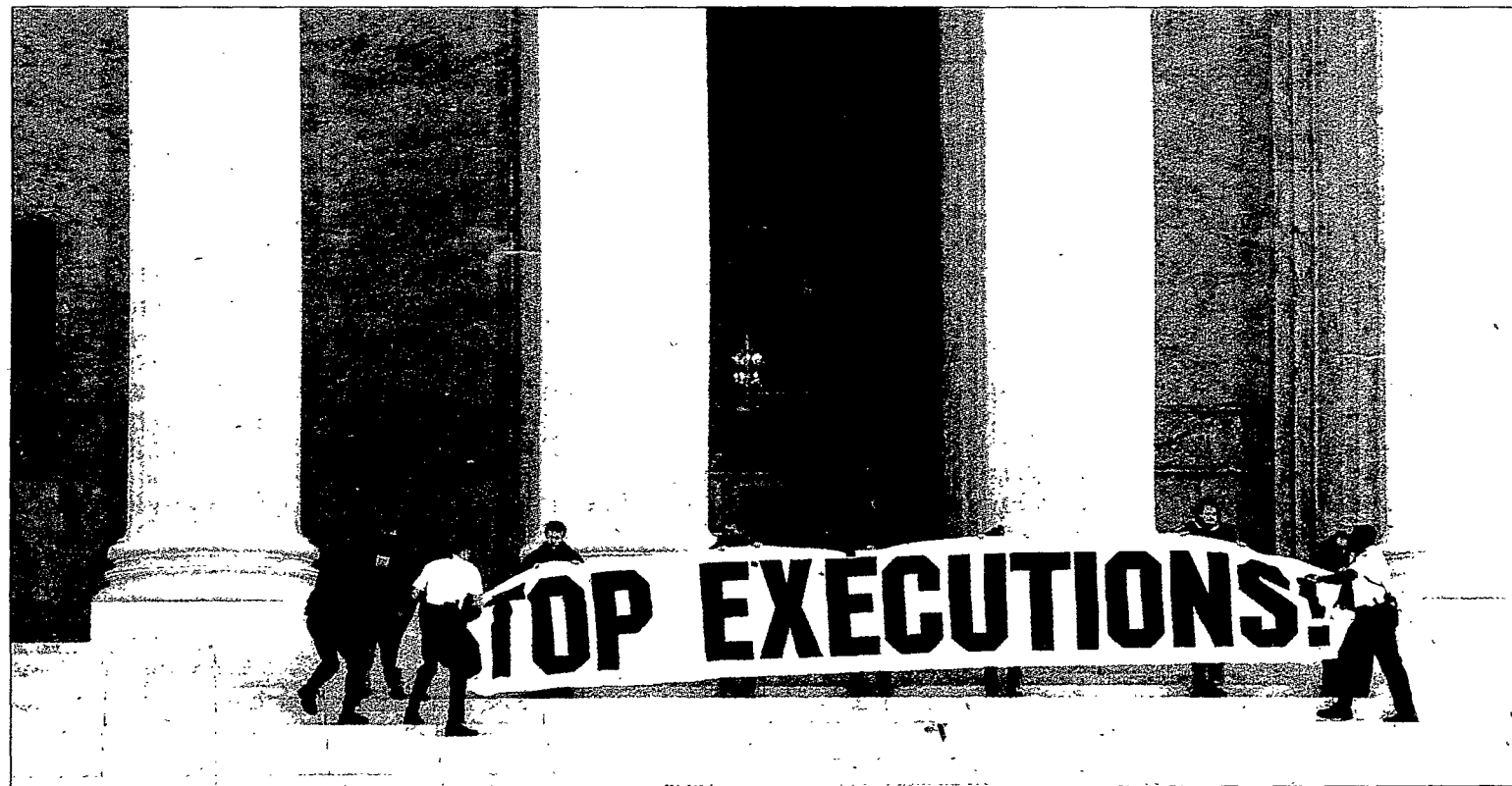


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Martin Lueders/CNS

Police confiscate a banner unfurled by opponents of capital punishment on the steps of the Supreme Court in Washington Jan. 17, 2002. The issue was again brought to the forefront after the outgoing governor of Illinois commuted 167 death sentences.

Rethinking capital punishment

Governor commutes death sentences; other states eye death-penalty reform

WASHINGTON (CNS) — As outgoing Gov. George Ryan commuted the death sentences of 167 Illinois prisoners in early January, the issue of capital punishment also took center stage elsewhere in the country.

In Missouri, opponents of capital punishment said they hoped their state would look at reforming its justice system in light of Ryan's actions. In Maryland, state officials released results of a two-year study which showed the death penalty was sought more for blacks, especially when crime victims were white.

And in the nation's capital, a national coalition said it would work to get bills introduced to outlaw death sentences for juvenile offenders in each of the 22 states that still maintain the practice.

In Illinois, Ryan won cheers Jan. 11 from death penalty opponents and the families of the 167 men and women who had been condemned by the state of Illinois. Four of them were pardoned after Ryan concluded they had been convicted on the basis of false evidence.

But his actions also drew bitter jeers from prosecutors, some murder victims' families and many state politicians.

The Illinois Catholic Conference praised Ryan's decision. While expressing sympathy for the murder victims' families and their pain, it affirmed that "the granting of clemency by Gov. Ryan is consistent with Catholic principles in opposition to the death penalty."

"The death of the murderer cannot bring back the one who has been killed, nor does revenge help to heal the hole in the heart of the grieving loved ones," it said. "We pray that Gov. Ryan's clemency will lead to healing."

Frank McNeirney, national coordinator of Catholics Against Capital Punishment, said in a statement that Ryan's "courageous action is in accordance with the best traditions of American jurisprudence."

In Washington, the U.S. bishops commended Ryan's decision. "His actions highlight once again the fundamental flaws in the use of the death penalty," said a statement from their Committee on Domestic Policy signed by Washington Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick as chairman.

"We pray that his courageous act will lead to a renewed national dialogue on how the use of the death penalty diminish-

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Story and photos by Catholic News Service

