

Would the pope OK Saddam's execution?

A week or so before Christmas, Cardinal Renato Martino, head of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, created a minor stir when he expressed "pity" and "compassion" for Iraq's former dictator, Saddam Hussein, and a concern that his capture might even do more harm than good.

"I feel pity to see this man destroyed, [the military] looking at his teeth as if he were a cow," Cardinal Martino said. "They could have spared us these pictures. ... Seeing him like this, a man in his tragedy, despite all the heavy blame he bears, I had a sense of compassion for him."

Cardinal Martino made his remarks at a press conference presenting Pope John Paul II's annual message for the World Day of Peace, Jan. 1. Reaction to his remarks sparked outrage from many sectors, and expanded into the more ethically serious issue of capital punishment. In a television interview, President George W. Bush expressed his personal view that Saddam should be executed, but quickly added that the matter was one for the Iraqi people to decide.

The president's view is undoubtedly shared by a majority of Americans, including Catholics.

Until recently, the church taught that the taking of a human life can be morally justified in self-defense; in the course of a just war; and in the execution by civil authorities of one convicted of



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Essays in Theology

a capital crime.

The first two conditions remain firmly in place. The third condition, eroding over the years, is now, in full retreat.

In 1980 the U.S. Catholic bishops issued a statement opposing the use of capital punishment and challenging the argument that it deters others from committing murder. The bishops said that the deterrence factor had not been established statistically. Catholic theologians had been moving even earlier in the same direction.

The coup de grace came in 1995 in Pope John Paul II's encyclical, *Evangelium vitae* ("The Gospel of Life"), in which the pope noted 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). The pope allied himself with this view.

Citing the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (n. 2266), he pointed out that the primary purpose of society's punishment of a crimi-

nal is "to redress the disorder caused by the offense." This can be done in almost every instance, said the pope, without resorting to the execution of the criminal.

Capital punishment, he insisted, should be employed only "when it would not be possible otherwise to defend society." Given the "steady improvements" in modern penal systems, however, "such cases are very rare if not practically non-existent."

One might have thought that the crime committed less than a month later by Timothy McVeigh, who blew up a federal building in Oklahoma City, killing scores of innocent people, would meet the pope's exception rule. But the pope personally appealed (unsuccessfully) to President Bush to commute McVeigh's sentence to life in prison.

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, head of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, remarked on the occasion of the pope's new encyclical that its teaching on capital punishment was "an important doctrinal advance" and indicated that the *Catechism* would have to be amended accordingly.

Does anyone seriously doubt what position the pope will take if a tribunal imposes the death penalty on Saddam Hussein?

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

Crops aren't 'silver bullet' for hunger

To the editor:

In his column, "Debate on 'altered foods' works against the hungry" (*Catholic Courier*, Dec. 11), George Weigel implies that Catholic leaders should support the cultivation of genetically modified (GM) crops by poor third-world farmers. Unfortunately, while this approach may provide short-term hunger relief, it is not a silver bullet for long-term food security in places like Zambia. First, there are ecological concerns. GM crops are typically planted in large amounts, reducing crop diversity, and contributing to hastened depletion of soil, air, and water quality. GM farming practices also encourage farmers to discard indigenous varieties. In Africa, over 2,000 native roots, tubers, fruits, and grains that have fed people for thousands of years have been bypassed to concentrate on "modern varieties" such as GM corn and soybeans. There are also economic and social concerns. Like the U.S., a handful of large-scale farmers may benefit from planting GM crops, but the multitude of small producers cannot afford them. Furthermore, millions of landless workers find their jobs replaced by machinery. The reality is most third-world families need help with subsistence farming and finding meaningful work!

Agencies such as Catholic

Relief Services (www.catholicrelief.org) support people-centered farming systems that encourage local decision-making, crop diversity, traditional crops, natural pest management, and soil conservation. Planting high-yield GM food may have a role to play in this mix. However, most companies selling GM seeds are not interested in small-to-moderate-sized plots of crops that supply food to households and local markets. These are "small potatoes" for companies interested in the heavy volume of luxury goods and international trade. Please encourage Catholic leaders to support participatory food systems that not only feed the hungry, but empower these same citizens to ensure food security for future generations.

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Sacraments strengthen us

To the editor:

I would like to add to the letter of Jane Stalica in the Nov. 20 *Catholic Courier* ("Tapes offer faith review"). This letter contains beautiful thoughts on the sacraments of Eucharist and Penance. Also, the writer is especially concerned with general absolution, and rightly so, since we have been using Rite Three — without individual confession — for a generation!

The late Father Bartholomew J. O'Brien reminds us of even more power of frequent confession in his booklet "PRAY (A Mini Course in Spirituality)." Besides washing away sin "the Sacrament pours courage into a person, it renders one's conscience delicate; it opens one's eyes to imperfections; it awakens dread and fear of evil; and it keeps one aware of Satan." These are tremendous benefits so needed in our secular word today.

Prayer, patience and hope is needed for our Church situation. We have great encouragement in our Holy

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