

World responds in horror to execution of Roger Coleman

by Anita Gallagher

On May 20, 1992, Roger Keith Coleman—whose defense team had developed overwhelming evidence of his innocence of murder—became the 250th victim of Virginia's electric chair.

In a handwritten statement moments before his execution, Coleman said, "An innocent man is going to be murdered tonight. When my innocence is proven, I hope Americans will realize the injustice of the death penalty as all other civilized countries have."

Virginia Governor Douglas Wilder, who received 15,300 letters urging clemency for Roger Coleman, and only 300 for execution, rejected an appeal from His Holiness, Pope John Paul II—the first appeal which the Pope had ever directed to Wilder.

The U.S. system of justice that ordered Roger Coleman's execution, in order to intimidate other nations and its own citizenry, is now being harshly judged by the world. The Vatican, through Cardinal Fiorenzo Angelini, has sent a strong message that one cannot be simultaneously against abortion and for the death penalty. Influential voices in Germany state that the death penalty has no place in a civilized state.

It may be that the United States, in flaunting the fascist philosophy of its legal system, is catalyzing a resistance to the death penalty based on the Christian idea that man is made in God's image, and that therefore all life is sacred. If so, then Roger Coleman will have realized his dying wish.

Reactions

Democratic Presidential candidate **Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr.**, May 21:

"The philosophy of the present U.S. Supreme Court is fascist. . . . First of all, not only did the U.S. government, from the federal Supreme Court on down, know that Roger Coleman was innocent, despite all their denials; they also knew that foreign governments and many people in the United States knew Roger Coleman to be innocent. Or if they didn't believe him to be innocent, they believed that his claims to innocence were strong enough that he should have had a proper hearing on the issues of fact and evidence. . . .

"So, when the federal Government executed Coleman by

telling the state government to go ahead and do it, through the federal courts, the Supreme Court included, the Supreme Court and the U.S. government were saying to the world: 'This man is innocent. So what? We know it. You know that we know it. We're going to kill him anyway—and what are you going to do about it?'

"That is the state of the system of justice in the United States, which is not only true of the criminal justice system: It's true of the economic and social justice system. In fact, my dear friends, we are living under a form of fascism properly called administrative fascism."

Supreme Court Justice **Harry Blackmun**, dissent from the Court's 7-2 vote to execute Roger Coleman, May 20, 1992:

"Last term the Court ruled that Roger Coleman could not present his arguments on the merits to the federal courts, simply because the person then acting as his attorney had made a trivial error in filing his notice of appeal three days late. While I dissented from that ruling—and still believe it was erroneous—I found some consolation in the Court's suggestion that matters might have been different had Coleman argued that he was actually innocent of the crime.

"Coleman has now produced substantial evidence that he may be innocent of the crime for which he was sentenced to die. Yet the Court once again turns him away, this time permitting the Commonwealth of Virginia to execute him without a hearing at which his evidence could be fully presented. . . . I would stay the execution."

L'Avvenire, newspaper of the Italian Catholic bishops, in a recent interview with Cardinal Fiorenzo Angelini, President of the Pontifical Council for Pastoral Assistance to Health Care Workers:

"Among the individuals and groups against legalized abortion in the United States, there are some who support the continuation of capital punishment. This is an inconsistency and an unacceptable contradiction."

In previous times, said Cardinal Angelini, "Catholic theologians accepted the death penalty. But today it is no longer admissible. There is a motive of civility: to condemn someone to death is barbaric. Today, instead, there is the

possibility of therapy: there is imprisonment, even for a long time. But absolutely one cannot kill, as now, 14 or 16 years after a crime. . . . [One cannot commit] a homicide in cold blood like that which occurred a few days ago [i.e., the execution of Robert Alton Harris in California]. Not everything sanctioned by the law is moral. That is valid both for abortion and for the death penalty.”

L'Osservatore Romano, official newspaper of the Vatican, recent front page editorial:

The death penalty is “a terrible desperate tool” of a society that seems to show “a primitive instinct for revenge.” The Harris execution should have been a turning point, but instead, the U.S. “seemed to return to an abnormal normality.” Recalling the Jerusalem mob’s preference that Barabbas be spared instead of Christ, the editorial concludes, “The changing moods of the people in the street should be taken with some critical reservation as far as the administration of human justice is concerned.”

German Labor Minister **Norbert Blum**, speaking in his capacity as Chairman of the North Rhine-Westphalia state section of the Christian Democratic Party, May 21:

“The Federal Republic of Germany is a firm ally of the U.S.A. and a reliable friend of the American people. True friendship demands openness in one’s mutual relation with each other. That is why I am urgently appealing to the United States of America: Abolish the death penalty. The death penalty is against the dignity of a civilized state. No earthly power has the right to assume the role of judge over life and death of a human being.

“The latest execution of prisoner Roger Keith Coleman and the circumstances under which it proceeded, are tantamount to barbarism in contempt of man. The death penalty has to be banned worldwide.”

Unità, one of Italy’s largest dailies, “The Pope: ‘Save that Man,’ But the Governor Ignores the Call,” Gianni Cipriani, May 22:

“The Governor of Virginia didn’t want to listen, even to the desperate appeal addressed to him by the pope: ‘Save that life, it is important for the sake of nonviolence.’ But Wilder did not want to hear anything. He even refused to receive the representative of the Bishop of Richmond bringing the message.”

L'Avvenire, paper of the Italian Catholic Bishops, “The Rulers Love Executions,” by Umberto Pascali, May 23:

Bishop Walter Sullivan [of Richmond] responded, on how the pope’s appeal was ignored, “The Virginia authorities, the governor, and Attorney General Mary Sue Terry, want the sentences to be executed. They want more executions. But do you know that in Virginia we have 45 people on death row? The authorities here love the executions.”

Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, a leading German daily, editorial, May 23:

The death penalty is against the Eighth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution which bans “cruel and unusual punishment,” but the U.S. Supreme Court decided in 1976 that the death penalty is “neither cruel nor unusual in all cases.” With the years of drawn-out proceedings, the death sentence has turned into an “arsenal of torture instruments that is prolonging the pain of death endlessly. With all good right, this situation may be called hell on earth.”

The 1976 decision is outmoded today, since “the death penalty has been unusual for a long time in the ‘free world,’ and each trial proves once again that its use after years-long procedures is cruel.”

New York Times editorial, “Dying for Federalism,” May 20:

“‘This is a case about federalism,’ said the [U.S.] Supreme Court last year as it ruled that Roger Coleman had forfeited his right to a federal Court hearing. . . . By federalism, the Court meant trusting states to provide justice without federal judges’ intrusions.

“Mr. Coleman’s execution . . . marks a modern low in the federal judiciary’s default as a guardian of justice. In the name of states’ rights, it exalts a state’s right to take a life by invoking dubious technicalities. And it exposes the utter failure of a governor and state legislature to secure fairness in capital cases.”

Washington Post guest commentary, by Richard Cohen, May 19:

“Many of the questions being raised about the Coleman case . . . should have been raised at the trial. . . . A rich man’s lawyer could have exploited those inconsistencies. . . . The death penalty remains an American abomination. The people love it, the Supreme Court permits it, and the chief judge [William Rehnquist], like a train conductor looking impatiently at his watch, wants it done expeditiously. In the case of Roger Keith Coleman, death penalty proponents have got to face their handiwork. If he is executed, the only thing that is true beyond a reasonable doubt is that a richer man would not have met that fate. The aggravating circumstance that most contributes to the death penalty is what it has always been: poverty.”

Time cover story, “Must this Man Die?” by Jill Smolowe, May 18:

“Roger Keith Coleman’s case is filled with the kinds of errors that make federal review so vital. There is an allegation that Coleman’s trial may have been tainted by a biased juror; that his lawyers made some major blunders; that another man may have committed the crime. But today procedural obstacles have blocked Coleman’s attempts to obtain a federal evidentiary hearing.”