

Cardinal O'Connor speaks out against the death penalty

Cardinal John O'Connor, Roman Catholic archbishop of New York, spoke out strongly against the death penalty at a special Mass on March 24, at St. Patrick's Cathedral. The Mass was for the Holy Name Society, a Roman Catholic organization with a strong presence in the New York City Police Department, and was attended by hundreds of New York police officers.

This important statement comes at a time when the newly instituted death penalty is facing its first severe test in New York State. Its principal proponent, Republican Gov. George E. Pataki, intervened in a high-profile case in late March, taking the prosecution of Angel Diaz, accused of the March 14 slaying of police officer Kevin Gillespie, out of the hands of Bronx District Attorney Robert Johnson. Johnson opposes the death penalty and has refused to say whether he would seek its use in the prosecution of Diaz. A Democrat, Johnson has said he will challenge Pataki's action in court.

Cardinal O'Connor dedicated the Mass to the repose of the souls of Officer Gillespie and Officer Michael Frey, who was also recently killed in the line of duty.

After the Mass, the Cardinal said that, while not wanting to inflame current political tensions, he felt compelled to discuss the issue and had deliberately selected an audience of police officers.

"I wasn't going to pick a nice, soft group of people who would take it in lightly and agree enthusiastically with everything I said. This issue is too important," the Cardinal said.

Reject the 'culture of death'

We reprint here portions of the homily with permission of the Cardinal's Office, Archdiocese of New York. The subhead has been added.

Today I would like to speak about a very serious subject, the death penalty, both because of the gospel today [John 11:1-45] and because of current circumstances in our city. . . .

I am opposed to the use of the death penalty as a bishop. Most bishops of the United States, perhaps all, are opposed to the use of the death penalty. The Holy Father discourages the use of the death penalty. But formal, official, Church teaching does not deny the right of the state to exercise the death penalty under certain, narrowly defined conditions. . . .

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is quite clear in underlining that the state has the right to use the death penalty, we do not deny this, and that bloodless means must have been exhausted. . . .

We see both pragmatic, practical, and philosophical or theological reasons for urging against the use of the death penalty, but again in accord with the teaching of the *Catechism*. One of the practical reasons is that many scholars still argue that the death penalty has not been proved to be definitively effective in deterring capital offenses. . . .

Many murders seem to be committed out of sheer madness. . . . Capital punishment can hardly be expected to deter madness.

Clearly there are many capital offenses attributable to drugs today. Would capital punishment deter this? It might, of course. The bishops have come to believe that it would not.

Then there are many who are simply calloused. . . . They do not care whether they live or die. . . .

Next, there would appear to be a statistical doubt about equity. Many argue that a disproportionate number of minorities guilty of capital offenses are sentenced to death comparable to those who are not minorities. Further . . . those who can afford extraordinarily skillful defenses are in a much better position to avoid the death penalty than those who are very poor.

Mistakes can be made

Then there is the fact that mistakes can be made. . . . A mistake is irreversible when a person has been put to death. For these and various other pragmatic reasons, the bishops have urged against the use of the death penalty.

There are other, in my judgment, more compelling, crucial, philosophical, theological reasons. There has been brought about a desensitization of the sense of the sacredness of human life in our society. . . .

We have developed in the United States a "culture of death." Death becomes the quick fix. Death becomes the easy answer, the answer to every problem. This person is terminally ill with cancer so put her to death, put her out of her "misery." Now we have this obscene recent decision of the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals in California legitimizing physician-assisted suicide. God help us all! . . .

Perhaps as important a philosophical reason as any other is that the use of capital punishment, the death sentence, lulls us into believing that we are solving the crucial problems of our society by putting to death its seemingly worst offenders, rapists and murderers, for example. But what do we really solve? Are we *facing* the vast, critical problems of our society, when we can not even teach the moral rightness or wrongness of murder in most of our schools? . . .

Finally, it is neither my responsibility nor my personal desire to be politically correct. . . . I would give my own life for any of you police officers, but I can not use this pulpit as a platform for a popularity contest. . . .