

EDITORIAL

End the death penalty

Enough is enough. Slowly, with the acceleration of a city bus, the tide of public opinion has inexorably been turning against capital punishment. The church, of course, has long opposed the death penalty as part of its consistent ethic of life. Seventeen states have either banned or established a moratorium on executions — the two most recent being Illinois, which abolished the practice earlier this year, and Oregon, where that state's governor placed a moratorium on use of the death penalty for the rest of his term, which ends in 2015.

Then last week came the results of a two-year study by an American Bar Association team of juris prudence professionals who've been examining the death penalty system in Kentucky. They produced a 510-page report which, in essence, said that system is a mess.

The report found that since the death penalty was reintroduced in this state — in 1976 — 10 of the 78 people sentenced to be executed were represented by attorneys who were disbarred after the capital punishment trials. It also said that two-thirds of those sentenced to death had their sentences later reversed on an appeal or were granted clemency.

"If you were a member of the travelling public and 60 percent of the flights you took were recalled, you'd decide to go by car," said Father Patrick Delahanty, executive director of the Catholic Conference of Kentucky, the public policy arm of the state's four bishops.

The ABA panel, in looking at the faults they found within the system, has recommended that the state temporarily suspend the use of capital punishment until new safeguards can be developed and put in place. Those safeguards would guarantee that an innocent person will never be executed by mistake.

The ABA team, which included two former Kentucky State Supreme Court justices, did not recommend abandoning the death penalty — they are instead suggesting that the program can be fixed.

But as Father Delahanty said last week, the state's death penalty system is so broken that it is likely beyond repair.

Father Delahanty, also a member of the Kentucky Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty, likened the system to an automobile that's unsafe. He said the system is in such a state of disrepair that, if we were to take this metaphorical car to an honest mechanic, he'd say the only way to

make it safe is to park it. The Catholic Church has long taught that capital punishment was allowable as a regrettable last resort if the safety of the public could be ensured in no other way. But Blessed John Paul II noted in a 1995 encyclical called "Evangelium Vitae" that modern methods of incarceration have made the death penalty unnecessary in almost all cases.

Life without the possibility of parole is an option in Kentucky, and with that safeguard against executing the innocent, there's no reason this state should ever lethally-inject or electrocute anyone again.

The ABA report contained a panoply of recommendations about fixing this broken system. It said state government should:

- Preserve all biological evidence.
- House the state crime lab apart from the state police, to assure the integrity of evidence testing.
- Adopt ABA model practices for promoting accuracy of eye-witness identification, and instruct juries on how to gauge accuracy of identifications.
- Require police interrogations to be recorded.
- Adopt statewide standards for qualifications and training of capital defense attorneys.
- Adopt guidelines governing discretion of prosecutors in seeking the death penalty.
- Redefine "mental retardation" in compliance with the definition used by the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities.

Here's a simpler, if not better idea: Just don't kill anybody in our name and call it an application of "justice." Just take the common-sense approach and realize that the "if-you-don't-kill-'em, they'll-never-learn" logic of capital punishment is wrong.

Study after study shows that the death penalty is not a deterrent to murder. Study after study shows that innocent people have been wrongly executed.

"Why would Kentucky lawmakers want to spend millions of dollars to implement the (report) recommendations and repairs when there will still be a risk of executing innocent people?" Father Delahanty asked.

Why indeed? The time has come for the state to step out of the dark ages and into modernity. The time has come to end the death penalty.

Glenn Rutherford
Record Editor

QUESTION CORNER

Organ donation and mission mail

FATHER KENNETH DOYLE

Q. Please comment on the church's position on organ donation. Upon death, can Catholics donate their bodies to science, for example, to a medical school?

A. Both organ donation and the gift of a body to medical research at death are not only permitted but encouraged by the Catholic Church.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (No. 2296) says that "organ donation after death is a noble and meritorious act and is to be encouraged as an expression of generous solidarity."

In 1995, Blessed Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical "The Gospel of Life," called organ donation "a particular praiseworthy example" of "everyday heroism" that offers "a chance of health and even of life itself to the sick who sometimes have no other hope" (No. 86).

The necessary prerequisites are: the full, free and informed consent of the donor or those responsible for his care; and, in the case of organs harvested from a deceased person, moral certainty of death by the use of cardiopulmonary or neurological criteria accepted by the church.

In explaining its anatomical donor program, Georgetown University's School of Medicine explains that "this section of a human body by every medical student is not

ing less than an indispensable part of a first-rate medical education and of medical research in general," with the result that "the Catholic Church considers the donation of one's body to science to be a formal expression of love and concern for one's fellow human beings."

My own diocesan cemetery donates grave sites and burial services for the interment of the cremated remains of those who have donated their bodies to science.

Q. I am a senior citizen on a fixed income. My kitchen table is now full of what I call "mission mail," all of it asking for donations. I have no idea what to do with all of the religious prayer cards, address labels, greeting cards, Mass cards, etc., that have been sent me. It must be that some of these charities are selling my name to other ones, which I consider an invasion of my privacy.

Most of the requests are for \$25, \$50 or even \$100; I contribute already to a number of Catholic organizations, but I cannot give to every charity, and my Social Security check only goes so far.

I am very discouraged. Please tell me what I should

do with all this mail.

A. Throw it away. These articles are not blessed; they are not devotional objects but simply pictures, and you may dispose of them in any manner that you see fit.

If you want to, and there is a convenient way to see to their reuse, you might pass them on to someone else, but there is no obligation for you to do this. You did not ask to receive these items, and it would be unfair to burden you with any guilt for not finding a use for them.

As for devotional articles — rosaries, medals, statues, etc. — if you were sure that they had been blessed, the traditional practice would be to dispose of them by burning or burying them.

But when such objects are sent unsolicited through the mail, they are almost never blessed beforehand; instead, it would be irresponsible for an organization to mail blessed objects without any assurance as to their proper use.

So relax and do whatever you would like with any of this "mission mail."

LIGHT ONE CANDLE

Centering Christmas on Christ

TONY ROSSI

I have a confession to make. Occasionally listen to Christmas music during the summer. If I'm stressed or feeling down, a little "Jingle Bells" or "Silent Night" is a perfect antidote regardless of the time of year.

I used to think I was the only crazy person in the world who did this, but I discovered a kindred spirit after interviewing Grammy-nominated singer/songwriter Matthew West on Christopher Closeup. West, who just released an outstanding CD called "The Heart of Christmas," has always had a year-round fascination with Christmas. It's not just the presents and decorations that attract him; it's the focus on the birth of Jesus Christ.

During our interview, West recalled that, when he was growing up, his parents always read the Christmas story in Luke's gospel before any presents could be opened Christmas morning. At the time, the waiting seemed like "punishment." Looking back now, it helped him realize, "There is no gift greater than the gift of the Savior."

That's a message West feels our society desperately needs. He said, "The Christmas that has become Christmas is anything but Christ-focused these days. From the advertising to the shopping to everybody trying to take

Christ out of this season, my wife and myself feel we have to make (Jesus) that much more of a priority if we want our kids to grow up knowing what Christmas is about and where true joy is found, not only at Christmas but all throughout the year."

One of the original songs on West's album is called, "Leaving Heaven," and it's sung from the perspective of Jesus as he's getting ready to leave heaven and enter human existence. There's a line in the song that the singer finds particularly important: "If you ever wonder how much you're worth, you should know you're the reason why I'm leaving heaven."

The reason it resonates with him is because his last album, entitled "The Story of Your Life," was completely inspired by letters his fans sent him sharing their personal triumphs and challenges. A common theme in many of those stories was people's struggles with their sense of self-worth.

West recalled one fan who said her father always told her she was "just a mistake." As a father himself, West was appalled at this message. He said, "Whether it's a result of parents who didn't know how to love them or friends who bullied them, (many kids) are growing up with this skewed idea of how much



they're worth and how God sees them.

"A lot of times, the message of self-worth in our world is skewed. There's a Lady Gaga song that says you were 'born this way.' It's supposed to be a self-empowering song. But I believe that our self-worth can only truly be discovered when we find who we really are in Christ — not in the mirror, not in other people's eyes or anything like that, but when we ask God to show us who we really are.

"And the first thing we can point to is that God loves us so much, he sent his son down to earth. So that message of self-worth and the message of Christmas are really synonymous," said West.

Matthew West's appreciation of God's gift of his son — and the resulting joy we should feel because of it — is reflected in his CD, "The Heart of Christmas." It's a message that's easy to forget during the hustle and bustle of the holiday season, but one that we need to keep the true meaning of Christmas alive in our hearts and minds.

Pope says joy found in Christ

By CINDY WOODEN

Catholic News Service
VATICAN CITY — In the dry spiritual desert of modern society and the darkness of moral and economic confusion, Christians draw joy from knowing that Christ is near.

Pope Benedict XVI said during a morning Mass at Rome's Our Lady of Grace parish and reciting the Angelus at the Vatican later Dec. 11, Gaudete (Rejoice) Sunday, Pope Benedict said true joy is to be found in twinkling Christmas decorations or presents, but in God's gift of his son.

During his homily at the parish Mass, the pope said the world today still needs a John the Baptist, "a voice in the desert, like today in the desert of the large cities of this world, the desert of the great absence of God."

"We need voices that simply proclaim to us: God exists,

is always near, even when he seems absent," the pope said.

Pope Benedict told members of the parish, which consecrated its new church in 2010, that their Advent task is to share the Good News with their neighbors, bringing light and joy to situations of sadness and struggle.

"In this world with so much darkness, we all are called to be witnesses of the light," he said. "We can do more than just carry the light within us, if we are sure not only that the light exists, but if we have seen a bit of the light" in prayer, in the Mass and in the sacrament of reconciliation.

The pope returned to the Vatican for the midday recitation of the Angelus and to bless the statues of Baby Jesus that children bring and then place in their Nativity

scene at home or at school.

The pope asked the children to remember him when they pray in front of their Nativity scenes and he promised to remember them in his prayers.

Advent is a reminder to Christians "to live in expectation of Jesus, to never stop awaiting his coming" and to maintain an attitude of openness to a deeper relationship with him, the pope said.

"The environment around us proposes its usual commercial message, even if it is toned down because of the economic crisis," he said.

But Christians "are called to live Advent without being distracted by the lights," he said. "If we persevere in being vigilant in prayer and exultant in praise, our eyes will be able to recognize him as the true light of the world, who comes to brighten our darkness," the pope said.

AN ENCOURAGING WORD

Experiencing anticipation in Advent

FATHER J. RONALD KNOTT

The people were filled with anticipation. Matthew 3:15

This is the last of a three-part series of columns around words associated with Advent that lead up to Christmas. So far, I have written about "memory" and "vigilance." Today, I want to say a few words about "anticipation."

Many of us, who were born in the 1940s and '50s, remember sparse Christmases that were marked by intense anticipation. Growing up in Rhodelia, my siblings and I were not showered with candy and toys all year round. Candy and toys were rare treats. Other than some necessary school clothes in September, we usually got new clothes at Easter.

As simple as things were back then, unlike today when we are often sick of it by Christmas Day, the anticipation of Christmas was almost unbearable.

I can remember one Christmas in particular. I may have been in the first or second grade. When I woke up and realized it was Christmas, I was shaking so hard that I could hardly function. I have

absolutely no memory of what present I got that year, but I can remember shaking and trembling with excitement as I sprang out of bed.

A friend of mine told me how his parents locked one special room a few days before Christmas and covered the windows so no one could see in. It was in that room that the parents put up the tree, decorated it and wrapped presents in secret, after the kids went to bed. The secrets going on in that room practically drove the kids crazy with anticipation until Christmas morning.

Today we live in an instant gratification world. Pretty much any pleasure we desire is on tap at any moment, night or day. Sex before marriage is now "normal." You can enjoy your new car, new coat, new washer long before it is paid for, just by putting it on a credit card.

Are you hungry? Just run to a fast-food drive-through 24 hours a day! Want some music? Just download it at two in the morning in your underwear at your computer. It is the age of now. The spigot of pleasure is constant-



ly running full blast. It's up to us to control the flow, to turn the faucet off, to set limits for ourselves, not because we have to, but because we want to. Why would we want to? Because "delayed gratification" offers many benefits. To experience the fullness of life, we have to be content to feel both satiation and hunger. If we are always stuffed from having gorged ourselves on pleasure, we will miss the other dimension of the human experience. Without contrast, you can't experience the pleasure of something. Delayed gratification can actually increase our pleasure.

Maybe next year, we will say no to beginning Christmas in September and choose the delayed gratification of Advent. That could make Christmas Day more intense than we can remember, rather than it feeling like the biggest let-down of the year.

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