



Appeared in *The Catholic Virginian* June 25, 2001

Timothy McVeigh

Two weeks have passed since the execution of the angry bomber, Timothy McVeigh. During that time we were all inundated with incessant news coverage, the majority of which lacked any real substance. The spectacle in Terre Haute, Indiana, with reporters, observers and demonstrators, led one observer to write "Terre Haute had all the qualities of an American macabre extravaganza." Since the execution, several articles have appeared in which the writers have begun to question the "killing of the killer." Timothy McVeigh was already a celebrity. In putting him to death he received international attention with people questioning who won in the long run.

I have always been opposed to what is called "legalized homicide." Killing a person to prove the point that killing is wrong makes little sense to me. This does not mean that those opposed to capital punishment are soft on crime. We suffer from a delusion if we try to prove the sacredness of human life by snuffing out the life of another. For me, inflicting the death penalty is a pro-life issue in reverse. In doing so, are we all not diminished in some degree as government executes in our name? Does not the killing of Timothy McVeigh – like the killings he committed - dehumanize all of us?

Those who are reading this article should know that I unequivocally condemn the bombing of the Federal Building in Okalahoma City on April 19, 1995, in which 168 persons lost their lives and 500 persons were injured and maimed. The hurt and rage of those who lost a loved one must be overwhelming. But killing Timothy McVeigh will never bring anyone back to life, or ease the pain of those now suffering. Timothy McVeigh remained unrepentant to the very end. He showed no genuine remorse. He did express sorrow that 19 children lost their lives, but he justified his actions as "collateral damage." Where did Timothy McVeigh learn such language? It was from the Persian Gulf War in which over 600 innocent Iraqi civilians were bombed. The then-General Colin Powell justified that action as "collateral damage." Most of us probably are not aware that

Timothy McVeigh was a decorated Army hero who received medals for killing in Desert Storm - where killing was so easily justified.

Seventy-five percent of the American people called for the death penalty of Timothy McVeigh, who described his execution as "assisted suicide." For most people the execution was a matter of justice, an "eye for an eye" as we can read in the Scriptures. Was justice really accomplished on June 11, 2001? Justice means setting things right, undoing what happened, making whole what was damaged or destroyed. Perhaps we might be enlightened by the reaction of those who lost a loved one in the bombing. As we can see for many of them, capital punishment does not satisfy the desire for vengeance, does not heal the wounds or ease the pain; it does not bring closure nor lift emotional burdens.

Those who viewed the execution directly in Terre Haute or on closed circuit TV in Oklahoma City, complained that Timothy McVeigh had it too easy, the execution was too quick. Four minutes after Timothy McVeigh was put to sleep and received three lethal chemical injections he was pronounced dead. Viewers resented the quickness and the painlessness of his death. He did not end up suffering like they had to suffer. As one person said so pointedly on TV, "The execution did not heal and I will take this to my grave." The rage against McVeigh was then turned on the executioners because they made things too painless for McVeigh and didn't do anything to relieve the pain of the victims. McVeigh went to his death considering himself a martyr for a just cause, a hero for killing just as he was a hero for a just cause in the Persian Gulf.

I hope that the execution of Timothy McVeigh will increase the ranks of those who oppose the death penalty. Executions do not deter crime nor do they make us any safer. Executions do not ease the pain because vengeance does not belong to us, and the ultimate judgment belongs only to God. Executions do not restore what was lost, and only forgiveness can bring true and lasting healing, just as Jesus set an example on Calvary. Bud Welch, who lost a daughter in the bombing, was at first enraged and wanted to strike back with the ultimate penalty. Then he learned the power of forgiveness and has become an outspoken opponent to the death penalty. As he said from his own experience killing McVeigh will not bring back the victims nor end the grieving.

Executions do not end the cycle of violence or the cycle of killing. They perpetuate killing and dehumanize all of society. Capital punishment is both an act of futility and counter productive. Legalized killing only makes killing more fashionable and more acceptable. In our country, the death penalty is inflicted principally according to the race and ethnicity of the person or according to the wealth of the person and the place where the killing took place. There is nothing fair or uniform about it. In far too many and unacceptable cases innocent people

linger on death row. DNA testing has proven the innocence of many of the accused. How many innocent have been executed?

Let us abolish the death penalty as administered so unevenly in our country, or at least declare a moratorium to examine all the ramifications of putting people on death row – especially while society can easily protect itself by life imprisonment without parole. On television some who were interviewed want to condemn Timothy McVeigh to hell for all eternity. Timothy McVeigh was a Catholic. He had a right to the sacraments of the church – which he received -- and to the forgiveness that Jesus extends to him. Should we not extend the same and do likewise for our own sake, if not for that of Timothy McVeigh.

+ Walter F. Sullivan
Bishop of Richmond