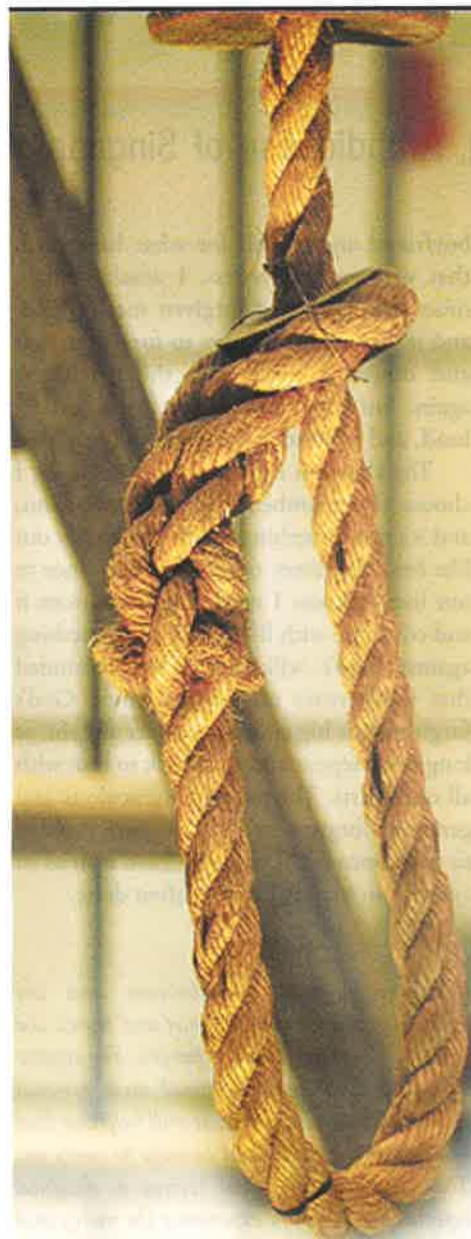




OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY CARITAS SINGAPORE COMMUNITY COUNCIL



DEATH PENALTY REVIEW

A step in the right direction

WE BELIEVE in the dignity of the human person and in the sanctity of human life ("Death penalty: Govt to grant judges 'some discretion'"; July 10). As such, we are opposed to the use of the death penalty.

We are, however, encouraged by the Government's recent move to give our courts discretion on the use of the death penalty for certain homicide and drug offences.

Although the move is limited, we recognise that it is a

significant change in approach in how we view our society, and the balance needed to keep Singapore safe, while maintaining the principles of fairness and justice.

It is a step in the right direction.

We are heartened by the Government's stance that while society needs to be protected and criminals punished, "justice can be tempered with mercy and where appropriate, offenders should be

given a second chance".

Towards this end, we urge the Government to continue to monitor and periodically review whether there is a need for the use of the death penalty, as Singapore matures and aspires to become a kinder and more compassionate society.

George Lim Teong Jin
Chair, Caritas Singapore

FORUM NOTE: The organisation is an umbrella group of 23 Catholic social service agencies.

THE DEATH PENALTY

Church welcomes proposed changes

Before Nguyen Tuong Van, 25, was executed, witnesses say he displayed a strong faith, telling those close to him: "We will see each other in our Father's house."

The Vietnamese Australian, baptised a Catholic on death row in Changi Prison, was hanged for drug trafficking in December 2005. Nguyen had tried to smuggle heroin through Singapore, and had said his motivation was to pay off debts incurred by his twin brother. The high-profile case sparked an outcry especially in Australia and drew attention to the use of the death penalty in Singapore.

Nguyen, who took the baptismal name Caleb, had drawn comfort from a book about the English martyr, St Thomas More, said Father Paul Pang, who was then chaplain at the Roman Catholic Prison Ministry (RCPM). He remains the spiritual director of RCPM, a member organisation of Caritas Singapore.

In early July, Singapore proposed easing its mandatory death penalty for drug trafficking and murder in some cases.

Judges will have the discretion to sentence low-level drug couriers either to death or to life imprisonment with caning, instead of the mandatory death penalty. This will be the case only when two specific conditions are met: that the offender is only a courier, or drug mule, and is not involved in the supply or distribution of drugs; and if the offender co-operates with the authorities, or is mentally disabled.

In homicide cases, the mandatory death penalty will be applied only when there is a proven intention to kill.

"The proposed changes in the law are something very positive and a step in the right direction," said Fr Pang, adding that the Church's opposition to the death penalty is clear.

"The end of the story is not at the end of the rope," added the Redemptorist priest who is based at the Novena Church. Not having the death penalty would give prisoners a chance to reform and be converted. "I can say this from experience. Some have become a credit to society... in the prison, there is already tremendous change," said Fr Pang, 76, who has been with RCPM for about seven years and visits convicts on death row every week.

He recalled a condemned prisoner who said he had made a decision not to become a Catholic. The man later read a book, *The Glories of Mary*, which was written by the founder of the Redemptorist Congregation, St Alphonsus Liguori.

The book changed this prisoner's life. "He probably didn't know I was a Redemptorist, but he eventually became a fervent and wise Catholic, moving on to read deep books like St Augustine's *City of God*," said Fr Pang.

The teachings of Jesus and the Church clearly emphasise the dignity of the human person, and that every human life is to be cherished.

The Church's understanding of the use of the death penalty has evolved. In the past, the Church permitted and even used the death penalty because it viewed execution as the only way to protect society from a grave threat to human life.

However, in modern times, that threat is no longer there, rendering capital punishment unnecessary, as Pope John Paul II made clear in his 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life).

"(The) nature and extent of the punishment... ought not go to the extreme of executing the offender except in cases of absolute necessity: in other words, when it would not be possible otherwise to defend society," the late Pope wrote. "Today, however, as a result of steady improvements in the organisation of the penal system, such cases are very rare, if not practically non-existent."

Singapore has proposed easing the mandatory death penalty for drug trafficking and murder in some cases. This is something the Church welcomes.

He also wrote that "the principle set forth in the Catechism of the Catholic Church remains valid: 'If bloodless means are sufficient to defend human lives against an aggressor and to protect public order and the safety of persons, public authority must limit itself to such means, because they better correspond to the concrete conditions of the common good and are more in conformity to the dignity of the human person.'"

Like Fr Pang, Father Paul Staes, CICM, also believes that Catholics in Singapore are generally not concerned or aware about the Social Teachings of the Church, particularly regarding the death penalty.

Fr Staes, 75, a Belgian priest who has lived in Singapore since 1994, first started visiting prisoners as a young student in Rome. He is a regular visitor to prisoners in Singapore, though not to those on death row.

He feels Catholics here are not terribly concerned about the death penalty, seem unaware about the Church's teachings and many may be in favour of it or have no opinion about it.

How can the situation be remedied? Fr Staes suggested: "I would say it's not a matter of information but it's a matter of faith formation in the total context of respect for life in all its forms, also when it comes to war and abortion."

On the issue of whether the death penalty is a deterrent to crime, Fr Staes agrees with the body of opinion worldwide that says this link has not been directly or conclusively

proven, despite numerous studies on capital punishment.

He added: "Even if it is a deterrent, it does not create an environment of respect for life. Cruelty in any form damages also the person who is cruel. That is why, for example, we say, no cruelty to animals because it makes you a cruel person. This is why we advocate kindness and compassion."

To this end, he was glad to see a letter on the recent proposed changes to the mandatory death penalty written by Caritas Singapore chairman George Lim. (See other story.)

Fr Staes expressed optimism about Singapore's latest proposals, adding that Singapore has come a long way from having more than 70 executions annually in the mid-1990s, to no executions in Singapore in 2010, and four executions in 2011, according to recent statistics from the Singapore Prison Service. These statistics also show that the total convicted penal population was around 10,000 in 2011, of whom about 6,000 were in prison for drug offences, including consumption and possession.

In taking the discussion on the death penalty forward, Fr Pang stressed the importance of continued dialogue with the government, as well as with society.

"The Church must not impose her view on society because we live in a multi-religious, multi-racial society. The solution is dialogue, calmly searching for the best direction to take for the good of Singapore. We're not a pressure group: pressure is something abhorrent, coercing people from outside. Instead, we seek to cultivate interior freedom in accordance with the dignity of respect for the human person," he said.

"The Church is above party politics but the Church has the right to make pronouncements on the moral aspects of society. Unless we can dialogue with them, we're not being the leaven in society."