

Does the Death Penalty Make Our Society Safer?

Statement of the Most Reverend John C. Wester, Apostolic Administrator of the Archdiocese of San Francisco on day of execution of Clarence Ray Allen, 1/17/06

Clarence Ray Allen was executed this morning at San Quentin by the State of California. Clarence Ray Allen, A Choctaw Indian, was 76 years old, and was the oldest man put to death in the U.S. in over 60 years. He was in poor health, suffering from advanced heart disease and diabetes. He was confined to a wheelchair and nearly blind.

Allen was convicted in 1982 for ordering the murders of three individuals while serving a life sentence at Folsom State Prison for the murder of a young woman, in 1974. The man who actually perpetrated the three murders, Billy Hamilton, also received a death sentence.

We must acknowledge and respect the pain and sorrow of the family and friends of his victims, Mary Sue Kitts, Bryon Schletewitz, Josephine Rocha and Douglas White. Their suffering is shared by all of us. They, the family and the Native American Community of Clarence Ray Allen, are in our thoughts and prayers. The State has a right to require punishment for heinous acts and it has the duty to protect the community from further acts of violence.

At the same time we must ask ourselves and our fellow citizens whether the violence of State-ordered executions, like that of Clarence Ray Allen, does not itself contribute to a culture of death in which respect for the dignity and precious worth of every human life is diminished.

Considering the advanced age and poor physical condition of Clarence Ray Allen, life in prison without the possibility of parole would have been a just and exacting punishment. We believe that the community would be protected by such punishment and that to continue the cycle of violence by killing undermines society's commitment to respect the God-given dignity of every human person.

I quote Pope John Paul II on the occasion of his visit to St. Louis:

A sign of hope is the increasing recognition that the dignity of human life must never be taken away, even in the case of someone who has done great evil. Modern society has the means of protecting itself, without definitively denying criminals the chance to reform.

On this occasion, I ask all people of good faith to reach out with compassion to those whose lives have been torn apart by violence, while at the same time offering the hope of forgiveness to those who have harmed others.

I ask Californians to ponder carefully whether the use of the death penalty makes our society safer. A moratorium is needed to evaluate whether the death penalty serves the common good and safeguards the dignity of human life. I am convinced that it does not.

Link: <http://www.californiapeopleoffaith.org/Sermons/Wester.htm>