

Bishop testifies at Capitol on death penalty opposition

written by Malea Hargett |

Bishop Anthony B. Taylor testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee Jan. 30 at the State Capitol in Little Rock to share his “unique perspective” on why capital punishment is wrong.

Bishop Taylor witnessed the aftermath of the rampage by the Texas Bell Tower Sniper at the University of Texas in Austin as a child, experienced the devastation after the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 and buried two parishioners and accompanied a death-row inmate to the execution chamber one year later.

Below is his prepared testimony:

“I have a unique perspective to offer regarding the death penalty because I have experienced both sides of this issue personally. My family was visiting the University of Texas, on Aug. 1, 1966 on the very day that a former Marine sniper, 25-year old Charles Whitman, killed his wife and mother and then barricaded himself on the top of the Student Union tower, from which he killed 14 others and wounded 32 in cold blood. I took shelter with the rest of my family behind a coke machine at a service station on Guadalupe Street. When we left our hiding place, I saw a bullet hole in the window and blood on the floor of a barber shop. I saw people assisting a terrified woman who had been shot at repeatedly but not hit because she took shelter against the low brick wall that surrounded a raised flower bed. I saw a lone high heeled shoe on the sidewalk, apparently abandoned by a fleeing woman. It was very frightening and we were relieved when word came that the SWAT team had taken out the still well-armed sniper. I was 12 years old; you never forget something like that.

“Almost 30 years later I was a priest serving in the Oklahoma City area when the Federal Building was bombed, killing 168 innocent persons — including 19 babies — and injuring more than 680 others. I had the funerals of two of the victims, Ethel Griffin and Tony Reyes. The grief of those families and indeed all of Oklahoma City was profound. We all drove with our lights on day and night until the last body was recovered. It felt like a month-long funeral procession. Practically everybody knew someone who had died. We felt some relief when the bombers were arrested and convicted, knowing that they would never be in a position to do that again. Terry Nichols was given life without possibility of parole. Timothy McVeigh was condemned to die, which actually turned out to be counterproductive: it made him something of a hero to some anti-government, white-supremacist groups to the point that for several years we had to live with heightened security every April 19 for fear of copy-cat bombers. Far from making us safer, his execution exposed us to greater danger because violence begets more violence, regardless of whether the killer is a Timothy McVeigh or the state of Oklahoma. By contrast, his accomplice, Terry Nichols, is rotting away in prison, a nobody, unable to inspire even white supremacists.

“On the other hand, in 1996 — the year after the OKC bombing — I accompanied Eric Patton to his execution by lethal injection for the brutal murder of Charlene Kauer whom he killed in a moment of passion under the influence of cocaine. Her family did not attend the execution. Her husband Les Kauer said, ‘The execution will do little more than stir up painful memories.’ We

think of premeditated killing as being even worse than crimes of passion. When the state kills, it is premeditated and cold-blooded. Eric was a model prisoner who simply needed to stay behind bars for the rest of his life. Whenever people said they supported the death penalty, I had them speak with Peggy Patton, his mother and an active parishioner. Once they experienced the toll it takes on innocent members of even the perpetrator's family, they usually changed their mind. Peggy didn't want him out of jail any more than anyone else.

"So I have experienced the death penalty from the side of innocent victims and the side of criminals executed, and what is violated in both cases is the sanctity of life: either by the criminal or by the state. I know you often hear Catholics talk about the sanctity of life in the context of abortion, so today I need to emphasize two obvious things: 1) life does not cease to be sacred once the baby is born, and 2) no one will be fully secure until we reject everything that threatens human life or degrades human dignity. Jesus' teaching about the sanctity of life is a seamless garment — an organic whole — that has come unraveled to the point that we tolerate utterly immoral behavior as if it were nothing — after all, if life is not sacred, "who cares what the state does?" He was a criminal, after all! Jesus — who was himself executed as a criminal — proclaims the sanctity of life at every stage of human existence from the first moment of conception to natural death and at every moment in between. God's gift of life is sacred, regardless of a person's usefulness to society, which means that there is no justification whatsoever to take the lives of people who are locked away and pose no further threat to society.

"The Old Testament passages that call for the execution of criminals have to be read in the context of a semi-nomadic people living in tents who did not have any way to incarcerate vicious criminals long term, much less for life! And that is the only possible justification for capital punishment: when and only when, a society has no other way to protect itself. We do not live in tents and we have very secure prisons capable of keeping dangerous people off the streets for life. So in the United States today, capital punishment is never justified, no matter how heinous the crime. Not even in the case of Timothy McVeigh! Even his life was sacred, regardless of what anybody thinks — including even what he might have thought — because it was given to him by God. So also were the lives of his victims."