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Catholics helped pass U.N. vote favoring global death penalty ban; Notes about: Episcopalians, Kolvenbach and Vatican PR

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

It would probably be pushing things a bit far to suggest that Tuesday's vote in the General Assembly of the United Nations in favor of a global moratorium on the death penalty is a victory for the Catholic church. It is, however, a result difficult to imagine without the Catholic contribution.

Consider the following footprints of Catholic influence:

- The principal NGO lobbying for the measure, the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty, composed of 64 member organizations in various parts of the world, was founded in Rome in 2002 under the auspices of the Community of Sant'Egidio, one of the "new movements" in the Catholic church;
- Ten nations co-authored the resolution: Albania, Angola, Brazil, Croatia, Gabon, Mexico, New Zealand, the Philippines, Portugal, and East Timor. Eight of the ten are majority Catholic states, where numerous Catholic associations and activists, as well as bishops' conferences, have been in the forefront of abolitionist efforts;
- The nation that formally presented the resolution was Gabon, one of nine majority Catholic nations in Africa. In announcing its own decision in September to remove the death penalty from its statute

- books, the government of Gabon specifically cited the work of Sant'Egidio;
- When Egypt attempted to scuttle the measure by attaching an anti-abortion amendment, both the Philippines and the Vatican responded by saying that while they would enthusiastically support a separate resolution on abortion, they did not want the pro-life cause to be instrumentalized in order to block progress on the death penalty, thereby saving the resolution;
 - Perhaps the diplomatic mainstay of the campaign for a global moratorium over the last 15 years has been Italy, with the strong backing of the Vatican.

The non-binding resolution passed by a vote of 104 nations in favor against 54 opposed, with 29 abstentions and five nations not present. The United States joined China, Iran, Sudan, Singapore and several Caribbean states in opposing it.

Though legislative success is always the result of heterogeneous coalitions, it's quite possible that without the strong anti-death penalty activism that's taken shape within global Catholicism over the last several decades, which came to a crescendo under Pope John Paul II, Tuesday's result may never have occurred. In 1996, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger said that Catholicism has witnessed a "development in doctrine" on the death penalty. The UN vote hints at the social capital of the Catholic church which this development has unleashed.

Objectively, of course, one can question how much importance to attach to the outcome. The UN passes resolutions all the time, many of them without discernable effect. Yet proponents argue that the measure establishes a new moral consensus among nations, and renders the situation of those states that continue to put people to death at least a bit more embarrassing. If nothing else, the vote is a signal that world opinion is moving, given that previous attempts in the General Assembly to pass a moratorium in 1994 and 1999 both failed.

I sat down this week for an interview with Mario Marazziti, the leading spokesperson for Sant'Egidio after its founder, Andrea Riccardi, and a key figure in the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty. Marazziti was in New York for Tuesday's vote.

The full text of that interview can be found in the Special Documents section of NCRonline.org. The following are excerpts.

NCR: Why is this happening now?

Marazziti: There are different reasons. Some countries have reached the conclusion that they cannot have internal reconciliation with the death penalty. Rwanda and Burundi are examples. Abolition becomes a tool to prevent future violence. Those countries have 800 people on death row, and if they kill them, another cycle of violence could begin. It's the same rationale as South Africa or Cambodia. It's very interesting that the three nations with the greatest genocides of the 20th century, Rwanda, Burundi, and Cambodia, are now without the death penalty. That's a strong argument in international conversation.

Other countries want to have stronger relations with Europe. Others have simply changed their minds,

which is the case of the Philippines. They had a moratorium, then the death penalty was reintroduced, then they abolished it. They were very active in the General Assembly in favor of the moratorium.

In this moment, about 90 countries have abolished the death penalty, and 43 countries are de facto abolitionists in that it's been at least 10 years since they executed anyone. Until 1977, only 17 countries in the world had abolished the death penalty. In other words, for 20 centuries only 17 nations had formally abolished capital punishment. Over the last 20 years, more than 50 countries have done so, meaning the acceleration has been dramatic.

How important has the church been?

Very important. The Catholic church, especially under John Paul II and continuing with what it's doing now, has had a real role in accompanying this change over the last 20 years, and the Philippines is one of the cases where you see that most clearly.

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We've worked side-by-side with Cardinal [Renato] Martino [President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace]. He gave me a short interview to be used on Nov. 30, when we had our "Cities Against the Death Penalty" event. He said something to us that has never been said at such a high level before: "The death penalty is homicide." Unfortunately the media didn't pick up on it, but the clear meaning is that you can't answer one crime with another.

What were the behind-the-scenes tussles like?

After 1999, Amnesty International had consistently advised against going to the General Assembly, out of fear of losing. The problem is that in the General Assembly, it's not enough just to add up the number of countries that are against the death penalty. Politics also enters into it. We were in favor of going to the General Assembly, but in an intelligent way ? not out of desperation, but on the basis of serious advance work. Then there were the radicals and groups such as Nessuno Tocchi Caino ("Hands Off Cain," the main anti-death penalty activist group in Italy) that wanted to go to the General Assembly no matter what. So there were three different logics completely.

Together with an American group, the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers, I mediated between these two other positions. At the end, between phone calls to New York, London, and so on, in a restricted committee with Amnesty International and Ensemble Contre la Pein de Morte, we wrote a key phrase: "Given that a successful resolution approved by the General Assembly of the United Nations would be of incredible importance towards the final abolition of the death penalty, we call upon member states to do all they can to work towards it." This compromise introduced the idea of a moratorium as a global theme. At this point, we all started to work towards the same goal.

From that point, we were in weekly contact with all the NGOs to coordinate how to carry out the lobbying in the various countries ? who was stronger in one country, who was more effective in another, and so on.

We wanted to avoid that it would be seen as a project of the European Union, reflecting a neo-colonial vision of human rights. For that reason, we ended up with Brazil and Mexico as the initial supporters, and then in the Third Commission, the resolution was presented by Gabon.

Within the Third Commission, with 192 countries just like the General Assembly, there was a ferocious debate. The first effort was to say that this is a matter of the internal affairs of nations, and not of human rights. It can't be discussed because it's an internal question. Once they lost on this, the opponents argued that it shouldn't be voted on by the U.N. because it's something that divides nations rather than unites them. Of course, that would mean never doing anything, because everything is divisive in some sense. The third point was that it represents the imposition of a Western vision of human rights on other countries.

There were three principal centers of opposition: Singapore, representing some Asian countries; Egypt, for the Arab and Muslim states; and finally Barbados, for the Caribbean countries. The Caribbean countries were ferocious ? they're tiny, but they put up a fight line-by-line, word-for-word.

At one point, the opponents proposed an amendment to add a paragraph saying that in the name of always defending life, it's also necessary to be against abortion. It was presented by Egypt, in the name of the Arab states. The response came from the Philippines, saying that this is a very important theme, and if there's a consensus we should present a new resolution on this subject, and we will be a co-sponsor. It has nothing to do, however, with this resolution.

The Vatican also responded ?

By 'the Vatican,' you mean in this case Archbishop Celestino Migliore, the nuncio of the Holy See as a Permanent Observer to the UN?

Yes. The central point was that the Holy See supports the defense of life in every circumstance, but on this very important subject we don't want to see [the resolution] instrumentalized for other questions. It was a very interesting position. Of course, the Vatican doesn't vote at the UN. Nevertheless, they said the defense of life is an important subject, but exactly for that reason it has to be without exceptions. In substance, the point was that the Holy See doesn't support the way some say, 'We have to abolish the death penalty' but don't care about abortion, and meanwhile those who were now proposing something against abortion were doing so to uphold the death penalty. We shouldn't get into deciding which lives are worth defending. It was a very sharp, well-constructed position, and I thought it was quite clear.

In the end, what does this result mean?

First of all, the death penalty has officially become a question of human rights. From the point of view of the international community, this is new. ? It fixes an official standard of justice without death. Even if it's not obligatory, it creates a moral standard. It will become ever more embarrassing for those countries that still use the death penalty.

The U.N. passes resolutions all the time that have little practical effect. Isn't it easy to see this as

hollow symbolism?

My response is that if this is truly meaningless, then why was there such fierce opposition for 15 years? There was strong, at times almost violent, debate in the hall. The best of the UN were involved, first as individual states and then as groups, going over the resolution line-by-line and word-for-word. It was extremely arduous work. It's hard to imagine so many people would have invested this much time and effort on something that doesn't mean anything.

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So far, most global press coverage of the UN vote has not highlighted the Catholic contribution. In Italy especially, the tendency has been to attribute the outcome to the efforts of the Italian government and various secular humanitarian groups, especially those linked to the Radical Party, which has long campaigned against the death penalty.

On Thursday, *L'Osservatore Romano*, the official Vatican newspaper, carried an interview with Cardinal Renato Martino, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, in the wake of the General Assembly resolution. In part, the interview focused on a perceived lack of recognition for Catholic efforts. Martino suggested that the church's role may be more difficult to appreciate since, for Catholics, the death penalty is part of a continuum of life issues that also features war, employment, and especially abortion.

A translation of that interview can be found here: <http://ncrcafe.org/node/1503>

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Two weeks ago, I reported on the Dec. 1 reception of Jeffrey Steenson into the Catholic church by Cardinal Bernard Law, the former Archbishop of Boston, in a private ceremony in Rome's Basilica of St. Mary Major. Steenson is the former bishop of the Episcopalian Diocese of the Rio Grande, which covers New Mexico and portions of Texas. He resigned amid the current crisis in the Anglican Communion related to the ordination of an openly gay bishop and the blessing of same-sex unions.

After my account appeared, Steenson wrote to pass along the farewell letter he sent to his brother Episcopal bishops, dated the day before his entry into the Catholic church. I reprint it here with his permission.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ ?

Thank you for your prayers and encouragement during this time of discernment and transition in my life. I want to assure you that I have, to the best of my ability, concluded my ministry in the Diocese of the Rio Grande in a manner that honors the Lord and the Church I have been privileged to serve since 1979. ?

Bishop Neff Powell reminded me of the historical context. The first sitting bishop to make

this journey was the very interesting Levi Silliman Ives, Bishop of North Carolina, a pioneer of the Catholic Movement in the Episcopal Church. He and his wife, the daughter of the great John Henry Hobart, were received by none other than Pope Pius IX on Christmas Day, 1852.

Those were very different days indeed, when the Episcopal Church was robustly Protestant, and such defections were almost beyond belief. Bishop Ives' own diocesan convention denounced his decision as an act of apostasy. His people complained that he had been disturbing the churches for some years by encouraging the practice of confession, and teaching the Real Presence of Christ in the Sacrament, and suggesting that the Churches of the Reformation might be a state of schism. Bishop Ives was called a pervert, in the negative sense of convert, and there was no doubt in any Episcopalian minds that he had gone over to the dark side.

Thankfully, our respective Churches are in a much different and happier place today, and decisions of this kind are able to be seen in an ecumenical light. My experience has been entirely different from the lonely path Bishop Ives walked.

Indeed, I have been blessed by the kindness and graciousness of our Presiding Bishop and you, dear colleagues and friends. May God bless you always and keep us focused on the goal of visible unity for the sake of the Kingdom of Christ.

*Yours faithfully,
Jeffrey*

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On Dec. 5, I published excerpts from an interview with the Father General of the Jesuits, Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, which had been carried in the Jesuit journal *Popoli*. (My translation of the interview can be found here: <http://ncrcafe.org/node/1480>). I gave the piece a provocative headline: "Theological dialogue with Islam 'impossible,' top Jesuit says."

The reference was to a direct quote from the Kolvenbach interview: "I'm afraid that at a theological and dogmatic level," he said, "dialogue with Islam is impossible."

Some readers wrote to challenge the headline, arguing that it created the impression of a hawkish anti-Islamic stance from Kolvenbach or the Jesuits that does not reflect reality. In fact, Kolvenbach goes on in the interview to argue that while Christians and Muslims are obviously never going to reach agreement on dogmatic questions (for example, the Trinity), friendship with Muslims and a "dialogue of life" remains "not only possible, but beautiful."

Headline writing is, of course, an imprecise art. I can see why some people felt my choice lifted one element of a more nuanced position out of context, and for that I'm sorry. Fortunately, I published the full text of Kolvenbach's comments on Islam, word-for-word, so that anyone who actually read the interview should not be in doubt as to his meaning.

There's one other component of the interview I did not include in my Dec. 5 excerpts, which sheds additional light on Kolvenbach's approach. Asked about the impact of 9/11 on efforts to promote dialogue, this was his response:

"It's unfortunately true that the attack on the Twin Towers in New York, driven by a violent fanaticism that justified itself using religious citations, has made every form of dialogue among peoples, cultures and especially religions appear naïve. Yet if humanity does not wish to condemn itself to death, there's no other path than dialogue. I certainly don't mean this in a diplomatic or strategic sense, but a sincere and open dialogue that participates in the permanent dialogue between God and humanity, as John Paul II put it. Such a dialogue presupposes on our part a permanent willingness to take the first step towards the other, despite all the discouraging experiences we've lived through. With the church, we Jesuits believe in a four-fold dialogue: the dialogue of life together, in a spirit of openness towards everyone; the dialogue of common action with all the men and women of good will, in order to build a better world; the dialogue of religious experience, with which, in a desert without God, believers rooted in their own convictions trace paths in the search for God; and finally the dialogue of theological exchanges, in which so many Jesuit experts take part, because to be religious today means to be interreligious, this 'new way of being church,' according to the expression of Paul VI."

(As a footnote, the 35th General Congregation of the Jesuits, a representative gathering of Jesuits from around the world that will elect a successor to Kolvenbach, opens in Rome on Jan. 7.)

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For those who know the mind of Pope Benedict XVI, it sometimes has been painful to watch him trip himself up on high-profile public occasions, eclipsing his own thoughtful arguments with a few minor, but terribly distracting, bits of phraseology. Regensburg and Brazil are two obvious cases in point.

I published an op/ed piece in *The New York Times* this week warning of another possible PR problem looming on the pope's trip to the United States next spring, the high point of which will be his address to the General Assembly of the United Nations. The op/ed piece can be found here: [The Vatican's Relative Truth](#)

The e-mail address for John L. Allen Jr. is jallen@ncronline.org

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