

# Virginia bishop urges mercy for convicted sniper set to be executed

ARLINGTON, Va. - As Virginia prepared to execute convicted sniper John Allen Muhammad, Bishop Paul S. Loverde of Arlington called for mercy and urged that Muhammad's sentence be commuted to life in prison without possibility of parole.

"In the needles of lethal injection, we see the manifestation of despair," the bishop wrote in his column for the Nov. 5 issue of the Arlington Catholic Herald, his diocesan newspaper. "And in this despair, in advocating the use of the death penalty, our society has moved beyond the legitimate judgment of crimes.

"Brothers and sisters, we are better than this," he added. "We are called to be more than slaves to despair; we are called to be heralds of hope."

Muhammad, 48, was scheduled to die by lethal injection in a Virginia prison Nov. 10 for the Oct. 9, 2002, murder of Dean Harold Meyers, 53, one of 10 victims killed during a three-week spree police said was carried out by Muhammad and Lee Boyd Malvo in the Washington area. Three other people were wounded.

Malvo, 17 at the time of the shootings, is serving a life sentence in a Virginia prison.

Bishop Loverde acknowledged that the crime spree that left "entire communities in shock and fear" could lead many to "desire revenge and ... even say that such a person deserves to die for what he did."

"It is understandable for us - all of us, myself included - to have these reactions, and to be outraged at the way in which innocent lives were so senselessly taken, with their families left to mourn and to ask questions which have no satisfactory

answers," he said.

But the bishop said "God's transforming mercy" calls people to move beyond such emotions.

"We are called to choose hope - hope in the redemption of an immortal soul - over the despair embedded in the death penalty," he added.

Bishop Loverde cited the Bible account of Jesus' treatment of the woman accused of adultery, who was to have been stoned to death according to Jewish law. Jesus asks the person who is without sin to throw the first stone, and, when no one does, tells the woman to leave and to not sin again.

"While recognizing the seriousness of the woman's offense and admonishing her to 'not sin anymore,' Jesus refused to choose death over life, or despair over hope," the bishop wrote. "Although he understood the demands of justice, his emphasis was on mercy and the human dignity of the sinner.

"If the woman had been stoned, she would not have had the opportunity to 'not sin anymore,'" he added. "And so, despite the initial reactions we might have in seeking revenge, we must not opt for the death penalty."

The Catholic Church has concluded today that capital punishment is not justified "when a government has other ways to protect people adequately against an unjust aggressor," the bishop said.

Quoting the Catechism of the Catholic Church, Bishop Loverde said "the cases in which the execution of the offender is an absolute necessity 'are very rare, if not practically nonexistent.' "

"When life without the possibility of parole in a maximum security prison is an

option, we have no need for the death penalty,” he said.

He urged prayers for the families of the victims of the sniper attacks, asking God “to help them experience the healing that only his hand can offer.”

“Let us unite our prayers and penance for John Allen Muhammad that he may experience God’s redemptive mercy, for the victims of his crimes and their families, and for the courage in our commonwealth to choose the path of hope instead of despair,” Bishop Loverde said.