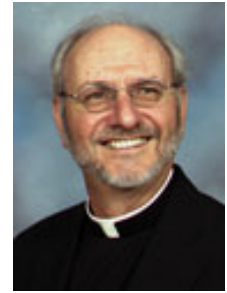


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Human Rights Evolving

On December 1, 2005, 17 people were arrested in Raleigh, North Carolina, as they attempted to enter Central Prison to impede the 1,000th execution in the U.S. since 1977. The group included social activists, graduate students at Duke Divinity School, members of Catholic Worker houses, plus members of murder victims' families and a former California death row prisoner.

Renny Cushing, a former state legislator from New Hampshire who lost his father to murder, issued a statement saying in part, "Human rights involves responsibilities...Tonight, my personal conscience accepts the human responsibility to oppose the violation of human rights that is the death penalty."

Because their protest occurred on the fiftieth anniversary of the event that triggered the Civil Rights Movement, those arrested referred to themselves as the Rosa Parks Affinity Group.

Rosa Parks, a 43-year-old seamstress earning \$25 a week, boarded a Montgomery bus fifty years ago, to return home after a long day at work. She paid her ten cent fare, then exited the bus to reenter through its back door respecting segregation's protocol. She and three other African Americans sat in the fifth row, the seats open to black commuters in the "no-man's-land" between whites and blacks. As the bus continued to fill, a white man was left standing. When the driver instructed the blacks in the fifth row to move to the rear, no one budged. He walked to the seats, and three reluctantly complied. Mrs. Parks softly responded she would not move. With her arrest, the spirit of the times took over.

The moment of defiance, while spontaneous, came after years of preparation. Long a member of the NAACP, Mrs. Parks was elected secretary of her local chapter in 1943. Later she spent a vacation week at the Highlander Folk School attending one of Myles Horton's interracial workshops and returning enthusiastic about new possibili-

ties for racial harmony.

Martin Luther King described Mrs. Parks's character as "impeccable and her dedication deep-rooted." She recognized that she had been thrust forward as a reluctant symbol for a new awakening of human rights.

While historians refer to the decade of struggle for racial equality as the Civil Rights Movement, Rosa Parks saw the incident from the perspective of human rights: "I was quite tired after spending a full day working. I handle and work on clothing that white people wear...this is what I wanted to know: when and how would we ever determine our rights as human beings?"

MLK offered a more philosophic interpretation: "She (Rosa Parks) was a victim of both the forces of history and the forces of destiny. She had been tracked down by the *Zeitgeist*-the spirit of the time."

So, civil rights, perhaps better, "human rights," leapt forward.

"The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (# 152) views the evolving identification of human rights as a way of describing ever more precisely what God inscribed in each person, "in our image, after our likeness" (Gen. 1:26). The Church that supported the legitimacy of slavery 150 years ago, now recognizes that slavery represents an abuse of human rights, and everyone's access to public accommodations stands indisputably as a human right.

In the same way, popular support for capital punishment is waning, while international human rights discourse rejects it. The Rosa Parks Affinity Group distributed Renny Cushing's statement emphasizing that responding to one human rights violation (someone's murder) with another human rights violation (capital punishment) fails to understand the journey family victims must travel. He writes, "Healing is a process, not an event."

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The Catholic Conference of KY (CCK) is an agency of the Catholic Bishops, established in 1983. It speaks for the Church in matters of public policy, serves as liaison to government and the legislature, and coordinates communications and activities between the church and secular agencies. There are 388,000 Catholics in the Commonwealth. The Bishops of the four dioceses of KY constitute CCK's Board of Directors.