Bishop Ott defends burial Mass for Sonnier

By JOE SCALES
Advocate staff writer

Executed murderer Elmo Patrick Sonnier got a funeral Friday usually reserved for prominent Catholics—a mass conducted by a bishop and burial in a plot surrounded by the tombs of noted priests.

But Bishop Stanley Ott, head of the Roman Catholic Church in Baton Rouge, said despite criticism he has received, he still feels it was an act of mercy and compassion.

The funeral was attended by about 30 persons, including Sonnier's younger brother Eddie, 27, who is serving a life sentence at Angola state prison for the same crime that got Sonnier condemned to death.

The younger Sonnier, accompanied by three guards, wore a prison uniform and chains around his ankles and wrists during the burial. Sonnier's infirmed mother was unable to attend.

Ott said he conducted the mass as a public gesture against the death penalty, because Sonnier's family had no money and because Sonnier had requested a Christian funeral.

"If you beg for forgiveness, you get the same burial as a servant who killed in action," said the person who called the Morning Advocate to complain. "If they wanted to give him a burial, they could have done it. It's a low key, small scale in his hometown."

Ott acknowledged he has heard the efforts to get his older brother's execution halted.

"There were tears in his eyes during the funeral service and later, at the burial, he wept as he gazed at his dead brother's head, which had been shaved for the execution.

The plane steel-grey casket was adorned with red roses. It and burial preparations had been donated by the funeral home.

Funeral home manager Larry Moore said he was contacted by the sisters of St. Joseph about helping to give Sonnier a proper burial.

He said he did not want to get caught in the middle of the issue of whether Sonnier should get a free burial, but agreed because the sisters asked him.

"I would not have done it otherwise," he said. "My feeling is that no matter who you are you are entitled to a Christian burial if you are a Christian."

According to Ott, it was Sonnier's request that the bishop perform the ceremony.

He said he could have let prison priests conduct the mass at Angola, but thought having the bishop do it would make more of a statement of forgiveness, mercy and compassion.

"Blessed are the merciful for they will obtain mercy," Ott said during the service. "... At the cross, Jesus said to the thief, "today you will be with me in paradise."

"Jesus, who should have received mercy, did not. But, he received God's justice," Ott said. "Finally, there must be mercy. May the mercy of God be with Patrick."

Elmo Patrick Sonnier's casket is removed from hearse

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