



A Call for the Abolition of the Death Penalty A Statement by the Washington State Catholic Conference

At the beginning of the third Christian millennium we, the Catholic Bishops of Washington State, reaffirm our Church's teaching that all human life is sacred. We Catholics believe that God is our Creator, and therefore we recognize and respect the dignity of each human person. Whether a person is unborn, very old, or guilty of a heinous crime, that person's life is a priceless gift from God. As faithful followers of Jesus, we are called to affirm the sanctity of all human life.

Our reverence and love for every human person demands that we reach out in a special way to the victims of violence. We decry the evil of murder, and we recognize the anguish of those whose loved ones have been murdered. Families and friends of murder victims have suffered terribly because of the loss of their loved ones. Our shared humanity requires that we try to console them by welcoming them into our communities of love and support. We call upon our parishes and faith communities to develop meaningful ways to minister to, and journey with, those who have suffered so grievously.

We condemn the actions of murderers, but this censure does not deny the God-given dignity of those who have taken a human life. While in no way condoning the actions of persons who have committed murder, we oppose the use of the death penalty as punishment for their crimes.

We Bishops, as shepherds of the Catholic community are especially concerned about the willingness of so many faithful Catholics to accept capital punishment as a response to violence. Sadly, there appears to be a chasm between what the Church teaches on this issue and what some Catholics are able to accept.

We must bridge this chasm. In the past few years, we have spoken against executions and called for life imprisonment without the possibility of parole, yet many people remain unmoved. To be effective, we must touch the hearts of the large number of Catholics who accept execution as an appropriate response to the violent crimes that confront our society.

In the case of the death penalty, some Catholics may not be aware of how the Church's teaching about capital punishment has developed. The Church has and still does recognize that the state has a right to use the death penalty when necessary to protect the community. Throughout history, when primitive penal systems could not use life imprisonment to protect society, the Church permitted the execution of murderers. However, even in the fifth century, teachers like St. Augustine cautioned that executions were a last resort saying, "...our desire is rather that justice be satisfied without the taking of lives."

As penal systems advanced and the circumstances where capital punishment was needed to protect the public became increasingly rare, Church teaching admitted fewer and fewer instances where executions could be applied. In our time Pope John Paul II has spoken clearly, forcefully, and frequently about the need to abolish the death penalty. Accordingly, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, published in English in 1994, was revised in 1998 to clarify that the circumstances that might allow for the use of the death penalty are "so rare as to be practically non-existent."

Though the Church opposes capital punishment, many in society believe that it is only fair that murderers be executed. Those who have witnessed or suffered from heinous crimes sometimes consider that the death penalty is just, because it seems proportionate to an awful crime. However, the death penalty does

not heal the pain of losing a loved one. Only journeying with those who have suffered can begin to ease their grief. Parish communities of care and hope can provide what executions cannot - an opportunity to encounter the transforming and healing grace of God.

When the desire for vengeance motivates us to demand state sanctioned killing, we foster a “culture of death.” Violence begets violence both in our hearts and in our actions. We must remember that the Church’s vision for our society is one where life and human dignity are universally respected. The unnecessary use of the death penalty erodes our respect for human life.

It also denies the offender the opportunity to repent and seek forgiveness. In some cases, the death penalty could deny offenders the opportunity to turn to God. Jesus does not seek the death of sinners. He seeks their conversion.

Our opposition to the use of the death penalty is reinforced by the possibility that innocent people will be executed. The injustice of executing an innocent person can never be undone. Our legal system is a good one. However, it does make mistakes. Since 1977, for every seven people executed in our country, one person on death row has been found innocent and released. While our society can protect the public by imprisoning those found guilty, we cannot justify the possibility of executing the innocent.

Neither can we justify the fact that our nation’s justice system disproportionately executes racial minorities, the poor, and the mentally ill. As a Church with a special concern for the vulnerable of our society, we cannot ignore that capital punishment so disproportionately affects them.

During his first visit to St. Louis in January 1999 the Holy Father renewed his call for Catholics to speak out against the violence of the death penalty.

“The new evangelization calls for followers of Christ who are unconditionally pro-life and will proclaim, celebrate and serve the Gospel in every situation. A sign of this hope is the increasing recognition that the dignity of human life will never be taken away, even in the case of someone who has done great evil. Modern society has the means of protecting itself, without definitively denying criminals the chance to reform. I renew the appeal for a consensus to end the death penalty, which is both cruel and unnecessary.”

In calling for the abolition of the death penalty, we first pledge our pastoral support for those who have lost loved ones to murder. We will continue to teach about the value of all human life, and encourage our pastors and community leaders to do the same. Finally, we encourage all members of the Church to prayerfully consider the teachings of the Church and the example of Jesus, and join with us in efforts to abolish the death penalty here in Washington State.

The Washington State Catholic Conference (WSCC) represents the Catholic Bishops of Washington State.

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