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October 23, 1997

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MASSACHUSETTS CATHOLIC BISHOPS
STATEMENT ON CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

Once again, legislation regarding the restoration of capital punishment has been put before the Massachusetts House of Representatives. In the past (1982, 1984, 1985, 1994 and 1995) we, the four Roman Catholic Bishops of the Commonwealth, have publicly opposed such a move. We last addressed this issue on May ninth of this year, and we do so once again.

Our hearts and our prayers are with the families of those who have lost lives through violent crimes. We do not believe, however, that violence can be a solution to violence, or that the taking of life of the guilty can be an effective means to demonstrate that killing is wrong. While the Church has traditionally taught that the state has the right to inflict capital punishment in cases of serious crimes for the sake of the common good, the Church never taught that the state has an obligation to exercise this right. In our judgment, such killing perpetuates the culture of death Pope John Paul II spoke of in his recent encyclical, The Gospel of Life. In that encyclical, Pope John Paul II reminded us that only God is the master of life. He further stated that cases calling for capital punishment "are very rare, if not practically non-existent." This reference has now been added to the section on capital punishment in the definitive edition of the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

We understand the mounting pressure in our Commonwealth for passage of this legislation. We are convinced, however, that capital punishment in our society will simply add to the escalating cycle of violence which all of us deplore. We maintain that society has a serious responsibility to find the best means to foster protection for its citizens and regard for the law. We are not convinced that the restoration of capital punishment of itself, is an adequate response. In its stead, we advocate appropriate sentencing as well as court-mandated restitution to the victims of crime and their families whenever possible. We also take this occasion to reiterate our call for both prison and judicial reform here in the Commonwealth.

Any doubt concerning the imposition of capital punishment should be resolved in favor of the right to life possessed by each and every human person.

+His Eminence, Bernard Cardinal Law
Archbishop of Boston

+Most Reverend Sean O'Malley
Bishop of Fall River

+Most Reverend Thomas Dupre
Bishop of Springfield

+Most Reverend Daniel Reilly
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