

MASSACHUSETTS CATHOLIC BISHOPS STATEMENT ON CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

March 22, 1999

We live in a violent culture. To counter this violence, all of us and especially our political leaders, should be concerned with fostering and strengthening the support of human life. This extends to every aspect of our civil life, even to the just punishment of serious criminals.

Governor Cellucci has moved in the opposite direction by filing a bill to institute capital punishment. For the ninth time, in almost as many years, we must once again engage in a debate on this issue. As we have done each time in the past, so again we, the Catholic Bishops of Massachusetts, speak out against the enactment of a death penalty. Absolutely no good will be achieved by passing this bill.

We all know that a capital crime is a horrific act that destroys a human life and is a crime of inestimable wrong. Murder, in any and every form, must be punished. It will not, however, be deterred by the violence of capital punishment. Capital punishment, by the state, simply involves us all in the death of another person. Violence begets violence.

The death penalty is simply wrong. It solves no problem. It renders us evermore callous as a society to human life. It encourages in us a mentality of vengeance and revenge. Yet, no amount of revenge can bring back a loved one. Capital punishment does not provide genuine solace to those burdened by the loss of murdered loved ones.

The teaching of the Church has been developed in recent years by Pope John Paul II. In his encyclical on life, he has written:

"The nature and extent of punishment must be carefully evaluated and decided upon, and ought not to go to the extreme of executing the offender except in cases of absolute necessity; in other words, where it would not be possible otherwise to defend society. Today, however, as a result of steady improvements in the organization of the penal system, such cases are very rare, if not practically non-existent." [Evangelium vitae 56.]

The Holy Father applied this teaching to this country, last month in St. Louis, when he said:

"the dignity of human life must 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...to end the death penalty which is both cruel and unnecessary."

Clearly today, we have the means in our society to protect our citizens from violent criminals without resorting to capital punishment. It is true that no person and no family should feel unprotected. All of us have the right to live with a sense of peace and security in our own homes and neighborhoods. Criminals should be quickly apprehended and swiftly punished. We should make any changes necessary in the judicial and penal systems to ensure this, short of taking the

life of another person, even a guilty person. The Legislature should turn its attention to these kinds of reforms. We Bishops stand ready to support such efforts.

Capital punishment, however, must be rejected as unworthy of us as a civilized people and unnecessary for us as a society protected by adequate judicial means. As we leave this most violent of centuries, it is time to put aside capital punishment once and for all.

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