



Washington State
Catholic Conference

From "Evangelium
Vitae": Chapter III

Public authority must redress the violation of personal and social rights by imposing on the offender an adequate punishment for the crime, as a condition for the offender to regain the exercise of his or her freedom. In this way authority also fulfils the purpose of defending public order and ensuring people's safety, while at the same time offering the offender an incentive and help to change his or her behavior and be rehabilitated.

[T]he nature and extent of the punishment must be carefully evaluated and decided upon, and ought not go to the extreme of executing the offender except in cases of absolute necessity: in other words, when 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. (56)

The Washington State Catholic Conference (WSCC) represents the Catholic Bishops of Washington State: Archbishop Alex J. Brunett of the Archdiocese of Seattle, Bishop William S. Skylstad of the Diocese of Spokane, Bishop Carlos A. Sevilla S.J., of the Diocese of Yakima, Bishop Eusebio Elizondo M.Sp.S., Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Seattle and Bishop Joseph J. Tyson, Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Seattle.

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A PASTORAL STATEMENT ON THE DEATH PENALTY IN WASHINGTON STATE

As eight men await execution in our state, Catholics and all people of Washington are confronted with unanswered questions regarding capital punishment. Is it fairly applied? Are innocent people executed? Are our motives revenge or safety? Is the punishment of death a cost effective means of ensuring public safety?

In May, 2009, the courts heard arguments on whether the method of execution in Washington is cruel and unusual. While acknowledging that the crimes of murder committed by those awaiting execution are indeed cruel, we believe that the court decision presents us with an opportunity to thoughtfully consider our state's pursuit of justice in capital cases. We, the bishops of Washington State believe it is an appropriate time to restate the reasons for our opposition to the death penalty and reaffirm our faith and teaching on the issue of capital punishment.

First and foremost our pastoral responsibilities call us to comfort and care for victims' families, friends and loved ones in response to the crime of murder. In keeping with our call as disciples of Jesus, we bishops have committed the pastoral resources of our parish communities to care for those who have been deprived of the life of a loved one by an act of violence. We reaffirm our commitment to console these secondary victims of murder by ensuring a welcoming presence within the Church to love and support them. We also join our voices with all other citizens in the demand that all of us be protected from those who would commit murder.

We are keenly aware that some consider our opposition to the death penalty a muted response to the crime of murder because it falls short of the demands of true justice. Despite our opposition to the death penalty as a punishment for murder, we neither condone any crime of violence nor suggest unmitigated leniency for those who commit such crimes. Our respect for human life compels us to condemn the crime of murder unequivocally, and we give our full support to the development of effective sentencing alternatives for this most grievous crime.

"I CAME SO THAT THEY MIGHT HAVE LIFE"

When someone is murdered, their death cries out for a response, but violence in response to violence only perpetuates the illusion that cruelty and the taking of human life can balance the scales of justice. We therefore call upon Catholics, all citizens and our state leaders to search for appropriate methods to protect innocent life from those who would commit murder. We pledge our assistance for every effort to obtain justice based on respect for human life and the inherent dignity of every person. As we have in the past, we acknowledge that in the most extreme cases of violent murder, the sentence of life imprisonment without the possibility of parole can be an appropriate sentence.

"[T]here is a growing tendency, both in the Church and in civil society, to demand that [the death penalty] be applied in a very limited way or even that it be abolished completely."

("Evangelium Vitae": Chapter III)

Catechism quotes:

Assuming that the guilty party's identity and responsibility have been fully determined, the traditional teaching of the Church does not exclude recourse to the death penalty, if this is the only possible way of effectively defending human lives against the unjust aggressor.

If, however, non-lethal means are sufficient to defend and protect people's safety from the aggressor, authority will limit itself to such means, as these are more in keeping with the concrete conditions of the common good and more in conformity with the dignity of the human person.

Today, in fact, as a consequence of the possibilities which the state has for effectively preventing crime, by rendering one who has committed an offense incapable of doing harm—without definitively taking away from him the possibility of redeeming himself—the cases in which the execution of the offender is an absolute necessity “are very rare, if not practically non-existent.”
(CCC 2267)

In order to establish sentences for violent crimes that meet the demands of justice, our efforts must reject state-sponsored killing. The Church recognizes that circumstances may exist in which the state could be forced to exercise its right to use the death penalty to protect the community. We therefore acknowledge that right. In the past, when life imprisonment was an impractical option to protect society, the Church permitted the execution of murderers while cautioning civil authority that every effort must be made to protect the innocent and punish the guilty without resorting to the death penalty. In recent times, as the need for capital punishment to protect the public has become increasingly rare, the Church has spoken out consistently for abolition of the death penalty and for exclusively nonviolent means of punishing the crime of murder.

We also must recognize the inherent flaws in all human efforts to establish true justice. These flaws are evident in the cases of innocent people who have been wrongly convicted of crimes in the past. When a travesty of justice robs an innocent person of their freedom for any length of time, we rightfully feel a sense of shame. But when our justice system denies an innocent person their inherent right to life, we have an urgent responsibility to amend the law. We also must acknowledge that our system of criminal justice, which reflects the highest standard of human rights by comparison with virtually all other models, nonetheless executes racial minorities, the poor and the mentally ill in disproportionate numbers. The Church has a preferential concern for those who are most vulnerable and marginalized, and we cannot ignore the absence of clear and convincing evidence that these statistics are not the result of biases based on race, mental competence or economic status.

“I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly.” (John 10:10)

“CREATOR OF HEAVEN AND EARTH...”

The foundation of our teaching on the issue of life is drawn from Scripture and tradition. From the creation account in the Old Testament (Gn 2:7) to Jesus' proclamation of his redemptive mission (Jn 10:10), Scripture teaches that God is our Creator and that every person has been made in the Creator's image and likeness so that they might have life in abundance. We therefore affirm the inherent dignity of every human person regardless of their age, stage of human development, usefulness or behavior – no matter how violent or reprehensible that behavior may be. As we noted in our 2000 pastoral letter calling for the abolition of the death penalty: “Each individual person's life is a priceless gift from God” and as faithful followers of Jesus, we are called to uphold the sanctity of all human life.

As Jesus' disciples, we are called to do more than simply profess our faith. Just like those who encounter the presence of God and the person of Jesus in Scripture, we too are called upon to make a response that reflects our commitment to act as a result of our encounter. In response to our understanding of the inviolable dignity of all human life, we must act to comfort the victims of violence, their families, friends and loved ones. We have an obligation to seek justice without seeking revenge, and we must offer a consistent witness to the love and mercy of God.

In conclusion, as pastoral leaders for the Catholic people in Washington State we call for a moratorium on executions until the many questions surrounding capital punishment can be answered. As we did almost 10 years ago, we commit ourselves to the pastoral support of those who have lost loved ones to murder, and we offer our support for sentencing reform efforts that will ensure true justice for victims and protection for citizens while respecting all human life. We ask that Catholics pray, study and reflect on Church teaching about the dignity of human life, and we ask public officials to dedicate themselves to the eradication of violence in the cause of justice.