

Calling for an end to the death penalty

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

May the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

It is very likely that in the next several weeks the North Carolina House of Representatives will vote on House Bill 529, which calls for a two-year suspension on executions in North Carolina. During this proposed two-year hiatus on executions, a thorough review of how the death penalty is administered in North Carolina will take place.

The Catholic Church calls for the death penalty to be rarely used, if it is to be used at all. In March, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops launched the Catholic Campaign to End the Use of the Death Penalty. My voice is joined with those of my fellow bishops of the United States in calling for an end to the use of the death penalty in our land. Our renewed call to end this most severe of punishments comes at a time when U.S. Catholics are becoming less supportive of the use of the death penalty (as revealed in a opinion poll conducted in November 2004 by the noted pollster John Zogby).

Whether or not our society chooses to end the use of the death penalty, the Catholic Church lends its most urgent support to all measures that seek to eliminate bias in the application of the death penalty and that ensure innocent persons are not erroneously charged with capital crimes and sentenced to death. I therefore support a moratorium on the use of the death penalty in the state of North Carolina as called for in House Bill 529.

I share with you below section 2267 of the Revised Catechism of the Catholic Church (1997):

"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 definitely taking away from him the possibility of redeeming himself -- cases in which the execution of the offender is an absolute necessity are very rare, if not practically non-existent."

The Church's teaching on the death penalty is based on the principle that all human life is sacred, made in the image and likeness of God. If the innocent of society can be protected from aggressors with non-lethal means, then indeed, such means are preferable to the use of lethal force. Modern society has the resources to separate the violent offender from society and protect the innocent, a choice that also gives the violent offender the opportunity to reflect on wrongdoings and seek the path to redemption.

The Church's teaching on the death penalty (expressed in the very first sentence of the catechism's statement on the death penalty) states that this most severe and final of all punishments is to be used only when the guilty party's identity and responsibility have been fully determined. Support for a death penalty moratorium receives added weight and increased urgency from recent case histories and research documenting that the death penalty sentencing process has erred in convicting innocent people. At least 119 people have been released from death row in the U.S.A. since 1976, of which five have been released from prison in North Carolina.

Even assuming that there may be a limited and just reason to use the death penalty to protect society, the death penalty process must ensure that innocent persons are not executed. Since the evidence clearly suggests that we are not sure that this will always be the case, further study of the death penalty process is warranted.

It only seems prudent that executions should be halted while a study of the death penalty process takes place. An execution is currently planned for May 6, 2005 in Raleigh. Does it make sense for our state to continue executions in the coming weeks, when we know full well that the House of Representatives will soon consider HB 529? Would it not be prudent that our state cease executions until the House of Representatives has at least had a chance to vote on HB 529?

The Church's teaching on the death penalty offers us a path to diminish violence in our society, not increase it. The teaching also considers the immortal soul of the evildoer, the one guilty of the terrible crime who is justly separated from society and punished for his transgressions. As we proclaim Christ's "Good News," our desire is that all might hear and accept Christ's message of salvation, including those among us who have committed heinously sinful acts.

The Church's opposition to the use of the death penalty in modern society and the Church's current concern that the death penalty process needs to be studied (to eliminate bias and errors in its application) in no way diminishes the Church's heartfelt concern for the victims of terrible acts. I call on all the faithful to reach out to those who have experienced the violent death of loved ones. Let us pray for their healing and for the souls of their departed loved ones.

Many of you respond to the advocacy appeals of the diocesan Respect Life Office and Office of Justice and Peace that encourage respect for human life. I commend such action that heightens our society's respect for human life. In contacting your legislators and executive leaders to urge passage of laws that promote the values and teachings of our Church, especially those that relate to the protection of human life, you promote the "Gospel of Life."

In time, such action can only serve to have a positive effect in increasing respect for the dignity of all human life, at all stages of development and growth.

Please continue to join your prayers with mine as we humbly ask our Lord to strengthen our efforts to promote a respect for all human life.

Sincerely yours in Christ,
Most Reverend Peter J. Jugis
Bishop of Charlotte