



Diocese of Helena

MONTANA CATHOLIC CONFERENCE



Diocese of Great
Falls-Billings

Montana Roman Catholic Bishops' Call to Abolish the Death Penalty

For Catholics working to cultivate a profound respect for life at all its stages, the true gauge of our success is how we treat the least among us. We often find those least among us on the streets, in nursing homes, in the womb, and on death row. Across the country, individuals who face execution are not necessarily those who commit the worst crimes; more often, they are the victims of poor representation and racial discrimination. This discrepancy, coupled with the significantly higher cost of the death penalty over life imprisonment and the reality that more than 150 wrongly convicted people have been exonerated from death row, are more than adequate reasons to take a serious look at the death penalty.

But our position as Catholics extends even to those who did receive fair trials, those who are guilty of the most horrendous crimes. Augustine tells us that the image of God in every one of us can only be tarnished, but never wiped away. Respect for life applies to all, even those who deny that respect to others.

When addressing the question of capital punishment, we must not lose sight of the victims of crime and their families. We seek to stand with them, minister among them, pray for their healing and sense of well being. In formulating our opposition to the death penalty, we draw strength from the loving example of so many victims' families who have rejected capital punishment as a system that denies the goodness and beauty of their loved ones and perpetuates an unending cycle of violence.

By standing in solidarity with the families of murder victims, we also recognize that capital punishment re-victimizes family and friends through a drawn-out, well publicized process of trial, sentencing, and appeals, in the midst of which the name of their loved one all but disappears. After the execution, the family

members of the offenders become victims of homicide themselves. The third tier of victims consists of those individuals who perform, condone, and fund the act of execution, from the death house attendants to the governor and lawmakers to the average citizen.

Here in Montana, the optional sentence of life without parole guarantees that the worst offenders will live out their natural lives in prison. In addition, technological developments have ensured that when used correctly, our prisons keep the public safe from those who commit heinous crimes. With this type of guarantee in place, the Church's teaching, as expressed in the late Saint John Paul II's encyclical *The Gospel of Life*, is very clear: "If bloodless means are sufficient to defend human lives against an aggressor and to protect public order and the safety of persons, public authority must limit itself to such means, because they better correspond to the concrete conditions of the common good and are more in conformity to the dignity of the human person."

In keeping with the Church's teaching to utilize "bloodless means" and in witness to the forgiveness of sin and the promise of new life exemplified through the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus, we call for the abolition of the death penalty in Montana. Such a policy secures the safety and protection of our people, helps restore the common good, provides opportunity for restorative justice, breaks the tragic cycle of violence, and ensures the prosperity of a Culture of Life in the great State of Montana.

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