



## WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

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June, 1995

### **Capital Punishment in Wisconsin A Statement From The State's Roman Catholic Bishops**

As the debate over whether to restore the death penalty to Wisconsin intensifies, the Wisconsin Catholic Conference wants to reaffirm its opposition to capital punishment and share some reflections on this grave matter.

#### **Scripture and Church Tradition**

The Catholic Church affirms that every person has an inalienable right to life. This reverence for life is grounded in Scripture, which announces that human beings "are made in the image and likeness of God." (Gn. 1:27) It is further rooted in the example of God, who not only refused to demand the life of Cain for murdering his brother Abel, but explicitly protected him from the vengeance of others (Gn. 4:15). It is continued in the mandate given to the Hebrews to choose life (Dt. 30:19) and fulfilled in the teachings of Jesus which claim that "we may have life, and have it to the full" (Jn. 10:10).

Today, respect for human life is the cornerstone of the "consistent life ethic," which is central to our faith and Catholic social teaching.

This faith and tradition compels the Wisconsin Catholic Conference, speaking for the Catholic Dioceses of Wisconsin and to Catholics and all citizens of our state, to renew its

opposition to the death penalty in our state. Restoration of capital punishment is incompatible with the consistent life ethic and with Wisconsin's Progressive traditions.

The taking of life has been offered as a solution to societal problems in every century. It was advocated as a means of saving society at the birth of Jesus (Mt. 2:16) and at His death (Mt. 26:3-5). It is advocated today for the same reason for select unborn, elderly, handicapped, real or potential enemies, and certain criminals. Killing has not proven its effectiveness anymore today than it did in Jesus' day.

Catholic teaching regarding the protection and affirmation of human life has developed as scientific advances and human experience have provided new insights into how human life can be protected. Catholic teaching on capital punishment has moved toward total opposition to using the death penalty to punish criminals and protect the community.

#### **Recent Teachings**

Since the Second Vatican Council, the bishops in all parts of the United States and throughout the world have regularly opposed the death penalty, even for the most heinous crimes.

In March of 1995, Pope John Paul II

further proscribed the use of the death penalty in his encyclical letter on *The Gospel of Life*. The Holy Father acknowledged that references to capital punishment can be found in selected passages of the Old Testament. However, as the Pope clarifies, these references must be read in the context of the New Testament: "But the overall message, which the New Testament will bring to perfection, is a forceful appeal for respect for the inviolability of physical life and the integrity of the person. It culminates in the positive commandment which obliges us to be responsible for our neighbor as for ourselves: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself' (Lev 19:18)."<sup>1</sup>

In applying this overall message to the situation facing us today, the Pope dealt with -- and rejected -- the argument that the death penalty may be appropriate to protect society from those who commit heinous crimes.

"Today," the Pope concluded, "as a result of steady improvements in the organization of the penal system, such cases are very rare, if not practically non-existent."<sup>2</sup>

#### **The Wisconsin Situation**

As we apply Catholic teaching to the situation in Wisconsin, we conclude

the "practically nonexistent" cases referred to by the Pope are not found in our state and that nothing in Wisconsin's experience justifies restoring capital punishment.

We note that our state has not executed anyone in over 140 years, the longest any state has gone without doing so. During that period, Wisconsin's crime rate has consistently remained below the national average and far below many of the states that execute people most frequently.

It is also a fact that our state's criminal justice system is among the nation's best. Few prisoners escape and almost all have been caught before they can commit a violent crime. Wisconsin prison guards are almost never killed by prisoners.

Judicial sentencing practices continue to change to assure that violent criminals will serve very long sentences. Convicted murderers are increasingly likely to remain incarcerated until old age or death.

Proposals to limit the death penalty to certain crimes, such as those against children, do not make it acceptable. Such selectivity is contrary to our belief that all life is sacred. Furthermore, history is replete with proof that violence begets violence. Experience with federal law and other states shows that once restored, the death penalty is soon extended to other offenses.

#### Other States and the Death Penalty

As we look to the actual experience of states that execute people, we note that the death penalty is not always carried out in a way consistent with a society committed to "equal justice under the law."

The death penalty is sought by prosecutors in only a fraction of homicides brought to trial, is imposed on only a fraction of those convicted, and is imposed on only a fraction of those sentenced. A disproportionate number of people executed are poor and/or members of racial and ethnic minorities.

Of greatest concern is the fact that the system is not perfect and that some innocent people have been executed. Once made, this mistake cannot be corrected. This provides another compelling reason why the death penalty should not be legalized.

#### Concern for Victims

In opposing capital punishment, we remain sensitive to the suffering inflicted on the victims of violent crimes. No one can observe the death of innocent people and the suffering of those who mourn them and not be moved to outrage. We join others in groping for ways to heal the wounds of those who grieve.

However, killing the criminal neither restores life nor heals pain. It achieves nothing outside of satisfying a desire for vengeance. We honor the dead more eloquently by rejecting the barbarism that caused their deaths in favor of the mercy and gentleness by which decent people live their lives.

#### Conclusion

We conclude by reaffirming the words of Pope John Paul II in The Gospel of Life, when he states, "Although laws are not the only means of protecting human life, nevertheless they do play a very important and sometimes decisive role in influencing patterns of thought and behavior."<sup>3</sup>

We also repeat the admonition of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, who said in 1980 that the elimination of the death penalty "sends a message that we can break the cycle of violence, that we need not take life for life, that we can envisage more humane and more hopeful and effective responses to the growth of violent crime."<sup>4</sup>

We believe our position reflects the teaching of Jesus, who is the Lord of mercy, compassion and forgiveness.

Instead of extending the "culture of death" further across our society, we urge our fellow citizens to embrace the example of God's response to Cain and to heed the words of Jesus, who ordered his follower to return his sword to its sheath (Jn. 18:12). We hope others will join us in opposing the restoration of capital punishment to Wisconsin.

#### Archdiocese of Milwaukee

Archbishop Rembert G. Weakland  
Bishop Richard J. Sklba

#### Diocese of Green Bay

Bishop Robert J. Banks  
Bishop Robert F. Morneau  
Bishop Aloysius J. Wycislo

#### Diocese of La Crosse

Bishop Raymond L. Burke  
Bishop John J. Paul  
Bishop Frederick W. Freking

#### Diocese of Madison

Bishop William H. Bullock  
Bishop George O. Wirz

#### Diocese of Superior

Bishop Raphael M. Fliss

1. *Evangelium Vitae* #40.  
2. *Ibid.* #56.

3. *Evangelium Vitae* #90.

4. U.S. Bishops' Statement on Capital Punishment, USCC, November 1980.