

WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

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WCC OPPOSES REFERENDUM ON DEATH PENALTY

In testimony presented this week before the Assembly Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety John Huebscher, Executive Director of the Wisconsin Catholic Conference, expressed opposition to an advisory referendum on reinstatement of the death penalty in Wisconsin.

Senate Joint Resolution 5 calls for a statewide advisory referendum on the question: "Should the death penalty be enacted in the State of Wisconsin for cases involving a person who is convicted of multiple first-degree intentional homicides, if the homicides are vicious and the convictions are supported by DNA evidence?" If approved by the legislature, the advisory referendum could be placed on either the September or November 2006 ballot. As an advisory referendum, the statewide vote would not affect state law, but be advisory to the state legislature.

"Catholics call each other and all people to embrace a consistent ethic of life, which measures all private choices and public policies in light of their impact on human life and dignity, regardless of how repugnant some lives may seem to us," he testified. "For us being 'pro-life' means protecting life at all stages of life from conception to natural death. We reject a selective approach that values human life only in certain circumstances."

He said reverence for human life is why the use of lethal force by the state, though permitted, is strictly conditioned. This has long been true in the cases of war and the death penalty.

"Our views on the death penalty parallel our approach to war. As societies have developed other means of dealing with threats to the community, resort to war and capital punishment are greatly restricted," he noted.

"That was the point Pope John Paul II made in his 1995 letter, *The Gospel of Life* when he said cases that justify the death penalty 'were so rare as to be practically nonexistent'." Huebscher argued. "And significantly, that was the same judgment the Wisconsin legislature made in 1853, when it abolished the death penalty after the construction of our first state prison."

Huebscher conceded that public opinion continues to favor the death penalty. However, he cautioned legislators to look to the example of their predecessors, who abolished Wisconsin's death penalty in 1853 in the face of clear public support.

"The public hangings in Wisconsin's first years of statehood drew large crowds. Those public spectacles painted a vivid picture of the popularity of the death penalty - and of the dark side of human nature," stated Huebscher. "Those spectacles convinced your predecessors there had to be a better way. They took that way by abolishing capital punishment."

“History has vindicated the legislature of 1853 by the kind of state Wisconsin has become. At a time when the human community is moving away from the death penalty, it would be tragic for Wisconsin to reverse its course,” Huebscher concluded.

Senator Alan Lasee (R-DePere), the author of SJR 5, was the only individual to appear at the hearing to speak in favor of the proposal. Those testifying in opposition included Milwaukee District Attorney E. Michael McCann, members of the clergy and various representatives from the Wisconsin Coalition Against the Death Penalty.

Following the hearing, the Assembly Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety on a vote of 7-5 approved an amended version of SJR 5 making the resolution available for consideration by the full assembly.

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