

WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

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WCC OPPOSES ADVISORY REFERENDUM ON REINSTATEMENT OF THE DEATH PENALTY

In [testimony](#) presented today before the Senate Committee on Judiciary, Corrections and Privacy, 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 April or November 2006 ballot. As an advisory referendum, the statewide vote would not affect state law, but be advisory to the state legislature.

In opening his testimony, 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 1854 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."

The Catholic Church's opposition to capital punishment is grounded in a commitment to a consistent ethic of life that seeks to assess all private and public choices in light of the impact on human life. Huebscher further emphasized that in the 1995 encyclical *The Gospel of Life*, Pope John Paul II noted that modern penal systems were now secure enough that the need for capital punishment is so rare as to be practically non-existent.

Huebscher concluded by urging the committee to carefully weigh the costs and benefits of an advisory referendum on the death penalty.

"Is this referendum really about discerning the will of the people? Or, is the intent to inflame it? And, what good will that do?" Huebscher asked.

"Fanning flames over the issue of capital punishment won't prevent or deter crime. We already know that. But an emotional debate over the referendum in an election season will deflect discussion from other vital issues - issues where policy can make a difference. Let's direct our public debate toward ideas worthy of Wisconsin's heritage - ideas that seek to address the real issues facing our families and children."

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