

WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

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BISHOPS WRITE PASTORAL LETTERS ON DEATH PENALTY, MARRIAGE

Wisconsin's Roman Catholic Bishops have written pastoral letters on the death penalty and marriage, both topics of referendum questions on the November ballot. The letters are directed to Catholics across the five dioceses of Wisconsin.

The letters are educational in tone, explaining Catholic teaching on the subjects of marriage and the death penalty. They are signed by all five of Wisconsin's diocesan bishops, who issued the letters through the Wisconsin Catholic Conference.

"These two referenda provide an opportunity for Catholics to bear witness to our teaching," explained WCC Executive Director John Huebscher. "The coming months provide a 'teachable moment' on two important issues. The bishops want to make the most of it."

Death Penalty Opposed

Writing in opposition to the death penalty, the bishops say, "We oppose the death penalty because we value human life, even when that life might seem unworthy to us. For Catholics, being 'pro-life' means protecting life at all stages, from conception to natural death. A selective approach that values human life only in certain circumstances is inconsistent with who we are as a people of faith."

The bishops acknowledge that in the past the Church accepted the death penalty, but note that use of lethal force by the state was strictly conditioned and limited. Citing the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, they write that if "non-lethal means are sufficient to defend and protect people's safety from the aggressor, authority will limit itself to such means."

"Significantly, the Wisconsin legislature made a similar judgment in 1853, when it abolished the death penalty after the construction of our first state prison. Our state has not executed anyone in 155 years, the longest any state has gone without doing so," the bishops observe. "During this time, Wisconsin's crime rate has consistently remained below the national average and far below many of the states that execute people most frequently."

The bishops express compassion for the suffering of families of crime victims, but argue that society honors their loss by rejecting violence.

"Any opposition to the death penalty is incomplete without a commitment to remember the victims... We honor those who have suffered loss through violence and violation by ministering to those who mourn. We applaud those Catholics and others who help survivors grieve, heal and renew their lives," they write.

"Killing the criminal neither restores life to the dead nor heals the living," they observe. "Instead of extending the 'culture of death' further across our society, we urge our fellow

citizens to heed the words of Jesus, who ordered his follower to return his sword to its sheath.”

Urge Support of Marriage

Writing on marriage, the bishops affirm the teachings of the Church that marriage is a union between one man and one woman.

“It is within this unique bond of mutual and reciprocal marital love that a man and a woman become one. This reciprocal love reflects the natural ‘complementarity’ between men and women. This complementarity blends the differences between men and women and enables them to cooperate physically, emotionally and psychologically. Complementarity is truly the gift through which a married couple becomes more than the sum of its parts,” the bishops write.

The bishops note that this is not a sectarian viewpoint, but one held by many faiths and traditions.

“We Catholics are not unique in our view of marriage. People of other religions and those who profess no religion have long held the same view. The laws of many nations favor or grant special status to unions between one man and one woman. This reflects a widely shared understanding grounded in the natural law that marriage and family life are fundamental to the moral and social well being of the community,” they add.

The bishops also emphasize that in affirming marriage they do not demean persons with a same-sex orientation.

“Church teaching regarding the dignity of homosexual persons is clear: ‘They must be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in this regard should be avoided.’ (*Catechism of Catholic Church* #2358) Even as we ask Catholics to support this amendment, we also urge them to repudiate words and deeds that demean individuals with a homosexual orientation,” they stress.

Huebscher concluded, “The Catholic tradition has something valuable to contribute to these debates. In affirming marriage and Wisconsin’s long-standing rejection of the death penalty, the bishops are asking Catholics to support policies that serve the common good. And they are urging them to do so with courage, compassion and civility.”

Copies of the letters may be found on the website of the Wisconsin Catholic Conference at www.wisconsincatholic.org.