

## CHRISTIAN TEACHING OPPOSES THE DEATH PENALTY

***“The discussion on restricting and abolishing the death penalty demands of States a new awareness of the sacredness of life and the respect it deserves. It demands courage to say “no” to killing of any kind, and it requires the generosity to provide perpetrators of even the most heinous crimes the chance to live a renewed life envisioned with healing and forgiveness. In doing so there is sure to be a better humanity.”***

**Archbishop Renato Martino  
Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations  
New York, UN General Assembly, 2 November 1999.**

While all Australian States and Territories have removed the death penalty from their statutes and it seems not at all likely that capital punishment will ever be reintroduced into Australian criminal sanctions, as a nation we have a responsibility to take a stand against the death penalty in other jurisdictions.

On 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2006, it will be twelve months since Australian citizen, twenty-five year old Van Nguyen was hanged on the gallows in Singapore. At the same time, six young Australians are awaiting death from a firing squad, as a result of the decision of the Indonesian courts.

But the concern of Australians about preventing further executions at the hand of the State extends beyond the protection of the lives of Australian citizens living abroad. Around the world, thousands of people are executed each year.

**The Australian Catholic Social Justice Council**, which acts with the mandate of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, is opposed to the death penalty in any country because:

- The death penalty is an offence against the dignity and sanctity of all human life, which must be respected even in those who have done great evil. Every human being has the right to life.
- The use of the death penalty undermines a society's respect for life and contributes to a culture of vengeance and death.
- The use of the death penalty is incompatible with the message and practice of Jesus Christ who preached forgiveness rather than upholding the law of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”.
- The death penalty is cruel and unnecessary. All societies now have other ways of protecting themselves from violent criminals.

- The death penalty denies those who have committed crimes the chance to repent and reform.
- The death penalty does not appear to have reduced crime rates in those States where it is applied.
- It is illogical and ineffective to oppose killing by means of State killings.
- No criminal justice system is infallible and there is always the danger that the innocent may be put to death.
- In many countries the death penalty is applied in a way that discriminates against the poor, marginalized, disadvantaged and members of minority groups.

### **Capital Punishment in the United States:**

The execution of Oklahoma City bomber, Timothy McVeigh, only satisfied a primitive need for revenge for the American people. It failed to bring about what could be termed “true justice” from a Christian value point of view.

American President, George Bush, who was previously the Governor of Texas, one of the American States with the greatest number of prisoners on death row, suggested that the execution did not represent revenge, but justice.

But “true justice” makes society better by bringing about reconciliation and healing, and it is hard to see how McVeigh’s execution could have achieved this.

McVeigh represented one of the most hated people in the United States and the message sent out by his execution is that you can kill people whom you hate. His execution provided him with international notoriety and took away the real punishment of spending his life behind bars, or of facing the possibility that in future years he might have recognised the consequences of his actions on the lives of so many other people.

American society has little good to teach us about public policy in the criminal justice system, with one in 200 of its citizens in prison and 3,415 people on death row. It is instructive that those American States that have capital punishment actually have higher rates of homicide than those without it.

Almost without exception, those who are executed in the United States are black Americans and Hispanics, who have been convicted of killing a white American. Having been on death row in Texas, Florida and California, I have seen clearly that this is the case. America kills its own citizens at a rate only paralleled by China and Iran and this practice clearly undermines their sense of the value of human life, rather than upholding the value of human life.

African Americans make up 42% of death row inmates while making up only 12% of the general population. They have made up 34% of those actually executed since 1976.

The increasing reliance on the death penalty in countries like America diminishes us all and offers the tragic illusion that we can defend life by taking another life! It is not only what the death penalty does to the offender, but what it does to us. It undermines our respect for life. This is the view of Bud Welch whose daughter was one of those killed in the Oklahoma bombing. He has visited McVeigh's father and opposed the execution.

Many people in America present a simplistic argument quoting biblical texts that appear to support capital punishment. The Old Testament texts on the law of retaliation (Books of Exodus and Leviticus) were intended to prevent excessive revenge by laying down limits to punishment, not prescribing "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth". The Christian tradition goes much further and seeks healing and reconciliation, following the teaching of Jesus who insisted on forgiveness.

### **A Sign of Hope:**

***"A sign of hope is the increasing recognition that the dignity of human life must never be taken away, even in the case of someone who has done great evil. Modern society has the means of protecting itself, without definitively denying criminals the chance to reform. I renew the appeal for a consensus to end the death penalty, which is both cruel and unnecessary".***

**Pope John Paul II, St Louis, Missouri, 27 January 1999.**

### **A Culture of Life over a Culture of Death:**

The need to spread what he called "The Gospel of Life" as opposed to the "The Gospel of Death" was proclaimed by Pope John Paul II in 1995 in his Encyclical Letter with that title. John Paul II adopted a position that was identical with that of the late Cardinal Bernardin, Archbishop of Chicago – namely the "consistent ethic of life". The clear message was that all attacks on life are to be resisted, whether they come from nuclear warfare, the practice of abortion, euthanasia, suicide, ethnic conflicts, immoral genetic practices, or capital punishment.

According to Amnesty International's Annual Report on official judicial execution, in 2004 there were 3,797 executions in 25 countries. Nine out of every ten executions took place in the People's Republic of China which carried out at least 3,400 executions. Between 1990 and 2001 the People's Republic of China has executed at least 20,000 people. Since 1976, when the death penalty was reinstated in the United States, where it is exercised in 38 of 50 States) 992 people were executed.

**The twelve countries with the most executions in 2004 were:**

<b><u>Country</u></b>	<b><u>Executions</u></b>	<b><u>Executions per 100 million residents</u></b>
China	3,400+	260
Iran	159+	230
Vietnam	64+	77
USA	59	20
Saudi Arabia	33+	130
Pakistan	15+	9.4
Kuwait	9+	400
Bangladesh	7+	5
Egypt	6+	7.9
Singapore	6+	140
Yemen	6+	30
Belarus	5+	48

From these figures it can be seen that, on a per population basis, Singapore has the fourth highest rate of executions per year of any country in the world, after Kuwait, China and Iran. On a per population basis, Singapore executes at a rate seven times that of the United States.

## **Conclusion**

A critical element of the Catholic Church's teaching in relation to capital punishment is the belief that **all** human life is sacred and that no distinction is made between innocent human life and those lives that others might judge as less worthy of protection.

The capacity of the Christian community of faith to apply this belief to the broad range of complex situations in different countries of the world will be a test of the credibility of this teaching and the credibility of the witness of its members.

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