

**Address for the Launch of the ACSJC Series Paper
Confronting the Death Penalty: People, Politics and Principle
Catholic Social Justice Series Paper No. 61**

Delivered by Archbishop John Bathersby

St Joseph's Catholic Parish, Corinda, 20 December 2007

Bishop Oudeman, Uncle Des Sandy, Fr Tim Harris, Mr John Ferguson, National Executive Officer of the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, distinguished guests, ladies and gentleman, I am honoured today to be asked to launch this significant paper focused on the death penalty, and prepared by the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council.

I do so because I believe deeply in the teaching of the Catholic Church that the death penalty is an affront to human dignity. I do so also because in this very parish and community a family is considering the possibility that their son, accused of drug crimes, could be executed in a foreign country for his action. We therefore gather today not merely to launch an excellent paper about this important issue but also to stand in solidarity and prayerful support with the parents, relations and friends of Scott Rush whom they love dearly but whose very existence at the present time is threatened.

The Catholic Church is driven by an understanding that each and every person is a child of God with a dignity that nothing can erase. It therefore supports the sanctity of human life without exception, even the lives of those who have inflicted great evil on other people. All are made in the image and likeness of God and nothing that we might ever say or do can remove that dignity. In contrast with this reverence for life, the death penalty undermines society's respect for human life and contributes to a culture of vengeance and death.

As well, at a practical level it denies those who have committed crimes the chance to repent; in documented cases it has led to the execution of innocent people; and far too often it acts disproportionately against the poor, the marginalised, and minority groups. For all those reasons and more the death penalty should be opposed, not just for fellow Australians but for all our brothers and sisters in the one family of God who throughout the world may face that possibility.

In doing so, Catholics in no way condone the action of those who may be facing such a penalty. Justice must prevail and appropriate punishment must be used for the common good of society when crimes are committed. All sensible people accept the fact that the drug culture is evil and terrorism a profound evil, and yet no evil can justify the death penalty as a punishment, no matter how horrible the crime that has happened. Because Australia opposes capital punishment as a party to the United Nations Second Optional Protocol on Civil and Political Rights, I hope the Federal Government will speak out strongly against the death penalty, already used by too many nations throughout our troubled world.

The paper to be released today contains powerful and deeply moving stories about the horror of the death penalty, and the even greater challenge of forgiving those who hurt

us deeply. Dr Michael Costigan speaks of his campaign against Ronald Ryan's execution in Melbourne in 1967. Fr Peter Norden describes his agonising wait in Melbourne as he supported the young Australian Van Tuong Nguyen, eventually executed overseas; and Brian Deegan describes his profound grief at the murder of his son Joshua, and yet, despite his anger, his struggle to oppose the execution of his own son's murderers. Professor Andrew Byrnes adds an excellent paper on the death penalty and human rights. All papers are wonderfully informative and I thank their authors.

Forgiveness of those who hurt us is one of the great challenges of life. Even in small matters no one finds forgiveness easy, so I can imagine the pressure upon those who are trying to forgive violent people who have hurt them or their loved ones. Yet on the cross Christ gave us an example to follow when he prayed, "Father, forgive them, they don't know what they are doing". In his article Brian Deegan shows us a pathway forward as we too seek to become more like Christ.

So today I commend this excellent paper to you all. I thank the authors for the generosity and courage of their contributions. I'm sure the paper will do much good in Australia and throughout our region. Today I assure the families present here that our prayers and good wishes are with them and their sons, in this difficult time. Now with much satisfaction I launch this fine paper, *Confronting the Death Penalty: People, politics and principle*, and commend it for your study and enlightenment. I thank also the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council for organising and promoting it.