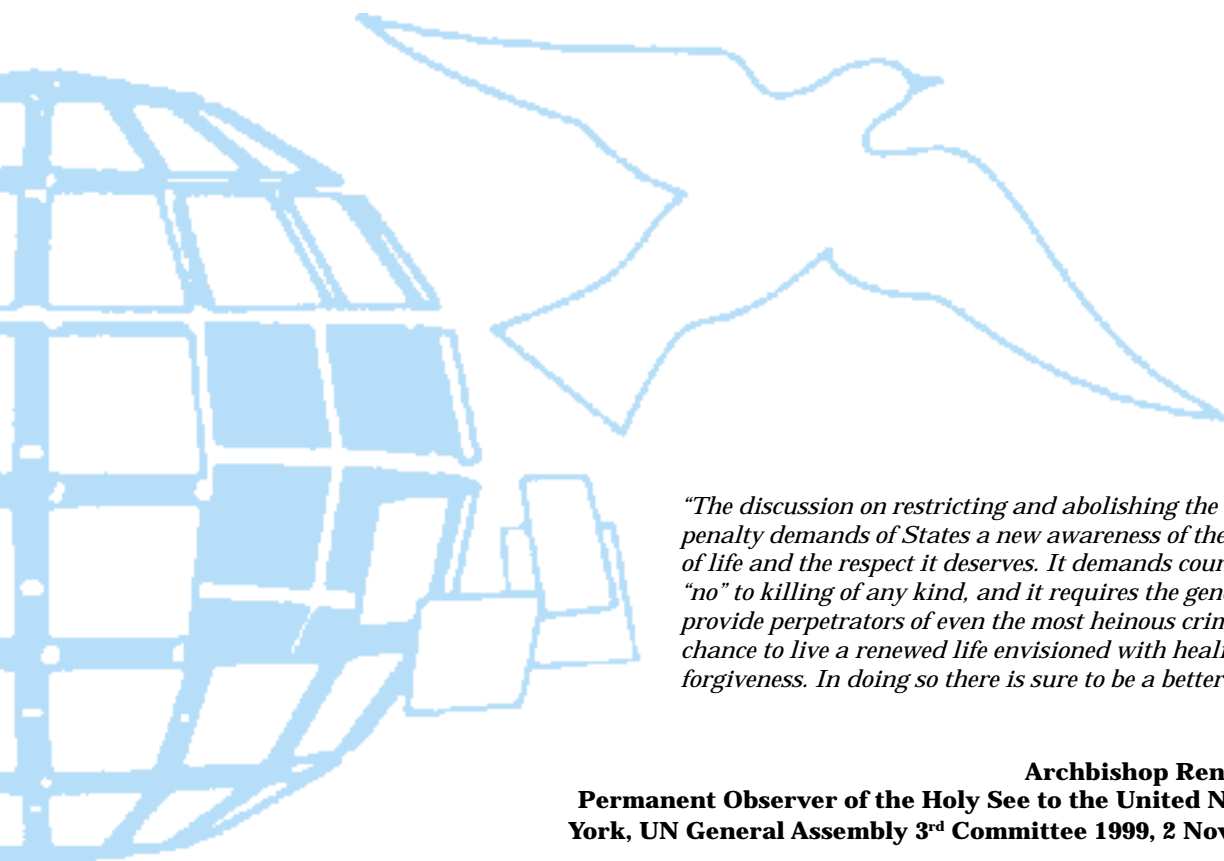


ACSJC Position Paper: Why the ACSJC Opposes the Death Penalty

The new evangelization calls for followers of Christ who are unconditionally pro life: who will proclaim, celebrate and serve the Gospel of life in every situation. 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 (cf. Evangelium Vitae, 27). I renew the appeal I made most recently at Christmas for a consensus to end the death penalty, which is both cruel and unnecessary.

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

Although the death penalty has been abolished in all Australian States and Territories, and Federally, calls for its return are still heard periodically. Significant political figures have recently supported calls for a referendum on the issue, and at least one political party in Australia officially favors the death penalty. Around the world, thousands of people are executed each year. A number of local Churches in the Asia-Pacific region are seeking solidarity and assistance to end the death penalty in their countries.



“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 3rd Committee 1999, 2 November 1999**

“Assuming that the guilty party’s identity and responsibility have been fully determined, the traditional teaching of the Church does not exclude recourse to the death penalty, if this is the only possible way of effectively defending human lives against the unjust aggressor.

If, however, non-lethal means are sufficient to defend and protect people’s safety from the aggressor; authority will limit itself to such means, as these are more in keeping with the concrete conditions of the common good and more in conformity with the dignity of the human person.

Today, in fact, as a consequence of the possibilities which the State has for effectively preventing crime, by rendering one who has committed an offence incapable of doing harm - without definitively taking away from him the possibility of redeeming himself - the cases in which the execution of the offender is an absolute necessity ‘are very rare, if not practically non-existent’ (Evangelium vitae n 56).”

Catechism of the Catholic Church (2nd edition), n 2267

The death penalty is also incompatible with a consistent ethic of life, in a society which is now more able to restrain criminals and more willing to work for their reform. For these reasons the death penalty has itself become an unnecessary and unjust taking of human life. We repeat our call for the development of humane restorative judicial processes for all criminal offending that allow not just for sanctions where appropriate but for apology, healing, mercy, compassion, forgiveness, and, wherever possible, reconciliation.

**New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference,
A Consistent Ethic of Life: Te Kahu-o-te-Ora, 18 April 1997**

... capital punishment, which the Church’s teaching now regards as unjustifiable in virtually every conceivable circumstance, continues to be practised even in otherwise civilized communities, often in the face of protests and appeals from members of the hierarchy, led by the Holy Father himself. The bishops of Australia would certainly oppose any move to reintroduce the death penalty in this country.

**Australian Catholic Bishops Conference,
A Milestone for the Human Family, Pastoral Letter for the 50th Anniversary of the Universal
Declaration of Human Rights, 10 December 1998**

For more than 25 years, the Catholic Bishops of United States have called for an end to the death penalty in our land. Sadly, however, death sentences and executions in this country continue at an increasing rate. In some States, there are so many executions they rarely receive much attention anymore. On this Good Friday, a day when we recall our Savior’s own execution, we appeal to all people of goodwill, especially Catholics, to work to end the death penalty.

Statement of the Administrative Board of the US Catholic Conference, 2 April 1999.

It is neither reasonable nor tenable to repose the most serious matter of the life and death of human persons at the discretion of even the highest civil authority in the country — the Office of the President.

Who lives and who dies? Who dies now and who lives longer? These are questions, the answers to which are better left to God who is the one and only giver of life. Taking this back or not is also His prerogative.

*One can only wonder and ponder what goes on in the mind of the President when he assumes God’s role!
...*

The Office of the President should be spared from playing this Godly role. The death penalty law should be ultimately repealed.

We have enough killings by others. The State should not add more to these.

**Bishop Oscar V. Cruz, then President of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines,
17 June 1999**

Why the ACSJC Opposes the Death Penalty

The Australian Catholic Social Justice Council 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, marginalised, disadvantaged and members of minority ethnic groups.

What You Can Do: Action Against the Death Penalty

- ◆ Read *The Death Penalty: Why Catholics Should Oppose It* No 40 in the Catholic Social Justice Series by Dr Michael Costigan and encourage others to do the same
- ◆ Use and distribute the prayer card on this issue prepared by the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council
- ◆ Write to governments that retain the death penalty requesting that they reconsider their position
- ◆ Visit www.amnesty.org/ailib/inteam/dp/ for a current list of countries that retain the death penalty
- ◆ Write to Australian politicians to ascertain their position and to seek their public support
- ◆ Write to governments in relation to particular cases
- ◆ Hold prayer vigils for those who are about to be executed
- ◆ Sign the *Comunita di Sant Egidio* petition for a moratorium on the death penalty for the year 2000

The Australian Catholic Social Justice Council

The Australian Catholic Social Justice Council (ACSJC) is the national social justice and human rights agency of the Catholic Church in Australia. It advises the Bishops on social justice issues in Australia and overseas; undertakes research and advocacy on such issues; educates the Catholic community about the Church's social justice teachings and their application; and facilitates the development of social justice networks within the Catholic Church in Australia.

The ACSJC is made up primarily of lay people and its membership is drawn from each of the ecclesial provinces of Australia. The ACSJC is responsible to the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference through the ACSJC Chairman, who is also a member of the Bishops' Committee for Justice, Development and Peace (BCJDP). Two other members of the BCJDP also sit on the ACSJC along with the BCJDP's Executive Secretary who is an ex officio member of the ACSJC.

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Some Useful Resources:

- ◆ Dr Michael Costigan, *The Death Penalty: Why Catholics Should Oppose It* No 40, Catholic Social Justice Series, Australian Catholic Social Justice Council
- ◆ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, second edition, n 2267
- ◆ Amnesty International, *When the State Kills*, April 1989.
- ◆ James J Megivern, *The Death Penalty: An Historical and Theological Survey*, Paulist Press, New York, 1997.
- ◆ Campaign for the Abolition of the Death Penalty
www.politicalresources.net/c-death.htm
- ◆ Ethics Updates http://ethics.acusd.edu/death_penalty.html
- ◆ Amnesty International Campaign Against the Death Penalty
www.amnesty.org/ailib/intcam/dp/
- ◆ Communita di Sant Egidio petition for a Moratorium on the Use of the Death Penalty for the year 2000 www.santegidio.org/en/pdm/index.htm

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**building
social justice networks**

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policy**

**educating
on issues**

**presenting
Catholic Social teaching**

**promoting
a spirituality of
justice**

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change**

