

CATHOLIC CONFERENCE OF OHIO

Letter on the Death Penalty **Catholic Bishops of Ohio**

December 2015

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

For many years the Catholic Church has advocated for an end to the use of the death penalty. In 1977, the Catholic Bishops of Ohio issued the first of many teaching statements. This was followed with statements in 1987, 1994, 1996, 2011 and 2015. As executions resumed in Ohio, it became our practice to send a letter to the Governor prior to each scheduled execution. In this letter, we advocate for mercy. In 2015, we implemented an extensive death penalty education and outreach program throughout our dioceses.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that the cases in which the execution of the offender is an absolute necessity “are very rare, if not practically non-existent” (#2267). Pope Francis has used strong words to call for an end to the use of the death penalty. Writing in 2014, he said, “It is impossible to imagine that states today cannot make use of another means than capital punishment to defend peoples’ lives from an unjust aggressor.” In September of 2015, during his address before the United States Congress, Pope Francis affirmed efforts of the United States Bishops to end use of the death penalty: “I am convinced that this way [the global abolition of the death penalty] is the best, since every life is sacred, every human person is endowed with an inalienable dignity, and society can only benefit from the rehabilitation of those convicted of crimes.”

Recognizing that for many, the death penalty is a challenging issue, we wrote a letter in 1996, calling for spiritual healing and caring support for all those impacted by murder. This statement urged a balancing of concern and pastoral care for the families of victims and for offenders:

“Too often our call for compassion and concern for the offender is misread as overshadowing our concern and empathy for victims and their loved ones. Such is not our intent. We commit the Church’s ministry to extend effective outreach and support services to victim families and friends. Abiding with the victim is essential for that person’s physical, emotional and spiritual healing. Never is one’s faith in a loving God more vulnerable than when suffering strikes in a swift and meaningless fashion. As bishops, we remind priests and other ministers of the Gospel of our mutual duty to attend

quickly to victims in order to pray with them and witness the love of God to them by our compassionate presence.

At the same time, our faith also beckons us not to abandon the offender, to love this person in Christ, and work and pray for his or her moral conversion and rehabilitation . . . No human life, no matter how sinful or lacking in love, is without value" (*Affirming Justice and Mercy: Reassessing the Death Penalty*).

The Feast of the Immaculate Conception on December 8, 2015 began the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy. In the *Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy*, Pope Francis invites each of us to follow the merciful example of God, whose *mercy endures forever* (Psalm 136). He writes:

"[Mercy] is a wellspring of joy, serenity, and peace. Our salvation depends on it. Mercy: the word reveals the very mystery of the Most Holy Trinity. Mercy: the ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us. Mercy: the fundamental law that dwells in the heart of every person who looks sincerely into the eyes of his brothers and sisters on the path of life. Mercy: the bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to the hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness.

At times we are called to gaze even more attentively on mercy so that we may become a more effective sign of the Father's action in our lives. For this reason I have proclaimed an *Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy* as a special time for the Church, a time when the witness of believers might grow stronger and more effective" (*Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy*, sections 2 & 3).

Perhaps, nowhere is this call for mercy more challenging than toward a person who has committed a grievous crime. Mercy does not eliminate the need for justice and just punishment. Pope Francis writes:

" Mercy is not opposed to justice... On the contrary: anyone who makes a mistake must pay the price. However, this is just the beginning of conversion, not its end, because one begins to feel the tenderness and mercy of God. God does not deny justice, He rather envelops it and surpasses it with an even greater event in which we experience love as the foundation of true justice... God's justice is his mercy given to everyone as grace that flows from the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ..." (*Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy*, section 21).

Just punishment is a vehicle for the correction and conversion of the sinner. It serves to defend society and its members, and provides for the restoration of the public order made chaotic by the perpetrated crime. However, just punishment can occur – and does occur – without resorting to the death penalty. If it is not

absolutely necessary to use the death penalty to defend and protect people's safety from the aggressor, the state is obligated to use "non-lethal means" (Catechism of Catholic Church, #2267). Other states and other countries have found effective ways to protect society by justly punishing offenders through non-lethal means. Ohio should do the same.

May each of us live as faithful witnesses of God's mercy, compassion and justice.

The Catholic Bishops of Ohio

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