



## An appeal by the bishops of Colorado to end the death penalty

May 10, 2001

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

We address these reflections to the Catholics of Colorado, but we also invite their thoughtful consideration by all persons of good will. Capital punishment, as an issue, concerns us all.

The repugnance which the death penalty evokes even in some who approve it points to the vital matters at stake: whether human life is sacred, and whether inflicting death is a “healing” act for society or one that does it grave harm.

Our conviction is clear: Whatever may have been the case in the circumstances of other times and places, *capital* punishment is wrong and cannot be justified today. Thus, to everyone who reads or hears these words we say, “Choose life” (Deut 30:20).

Criminals must be punished. But the need to punish them does not lead logically to the conclusion that capital punishment can be justified.

The punishment of crime can help foster rehabilitation. But capital punishment — by definition — prevents rehabilitation and brings it to a permanent halt.

Punishment is necessary to protect the community. But, as Pope John Paul II has observed, improvements in the penal system make those situations in which inflicting death is the only way to protect the community “very rare, if not practically nonexistent” (*Evangelium Vitae*, 56).

### **Capital punishment disproportionately imposed**

Punishment is needed to deter potential criminals. But the evidence on whether capital punishment deters anyone from murder is ambiguous and inconclusive.

Punishment is required to restore the justice that crime disturbs. But, in practice, people look on capital punishment merely as society’s way of extracting revenge from particularly serious offenders.

The moral reality of inflicted death becomes even clearer when we consider arguments against it.

People sentenced to death for serious crimes sometimes turn out to be innocent. A mistake in these circumstances can hardly be corrected once the sentence is carried out.

The death penalty is disproportionately imposed on the poor and disadvantaged, on those with limited intelligence and an abnormal degree of impulsiveness, on those who have suffered family breakdown, abuse, and neglect. Certainly people who commit serious crimes should experience a full measure of justice; but in taking their lives, society often chooses an easy way to dispose of the human consequences of problems it has previously ignored.

### **Capital punishment cheapens life**

The death penalty cheapens respect for life and increases our taste for vengeance. Since capital punishment was reinstated in the United States in 1976, nearly 700 executions have taken place. Thousands wait on the death rows of America to die. This is an appalling record for a society that considers itself humane.

"That's all very well," someone might reply, "but what about Timothy McVeigh? He deliberately committed a terrible crime, his guilt is clear, and he shows no remorse. If anyone deserves to die, it is he."

Yes, let's consider Timothy McVeigh. His reasoning was perverse, his crime an act of barbarity. But doesn't society adopt his reasoning and sink to his barbarity in killing him for revenge?

The spirit of vengeance is visible in the decision to let victims and families of victims of McVeigh's crime watch him die on closed-circuit television. This bizarre concession is said to be for the sake of closure. But true closure would mean ending the cycle of violence and revenge, not continuing it.

### **Capital punishment supports culture of death**

We realize that the Christian tradition does not speak with one voice about capital punishment. The Bible contains passages that accept the death penalty, and even apparently require it, for some acts.

But the words and deeds of Jesus in the New Testament communicate a very different message: "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her" (Jn 8:7); "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Mt 26:52). The Lord also tells his followers, "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful" (Lk 6:36).

Over the centuries, various theologians have argued that the death penalty can be justified. But in our times, Pope John Paul has powerfully and persuasively condemned it. This teaching has been incorporated into the Catechism of the Catholic Church. It has been preached repeatedly by individual bishops and groups of bishops. Those speaking from other religious traditions can tell a similar story.

In an *Appeal To End the Death Penalty*, published on Good Friday of 1999, the bishops of the Administrative Board of the U. S. Catholic Conference expressed the hope — a hope we share — that people whose fear of crime and anger at the loss of innocent lives lead them to support capital punishment "will come to see, as we have, that more violence is not the answer."

"We oppose capital punishment not just for what it does to those guilty of grievous crimes, but for what it does to all of us as a society," the bishops said.

Violence is the curse of our society. It is a common denominator in everything from violent video games, movies and song lyrics, to school shootings, teenage suicides, euthanasia and abortion. High and low culture alike exploits mayhem for entertainment. Outside the prison where Timothy McVeigh is to die hawkers will sell T-shirts with the slogan "Hoosier Hospitality." Some Americans stockpile guns as casually as canned food.

Capital punishment is not the cause of all these things, but it lends them support and is, in turn, fed by them. It is part of a culture of violence and death.

For the sake of our own humanity and the humanity of our families and children, let us turn away from violence and build a culture of life. Let us end the death penalty *for the love of life*. "I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice, and cleaving to him; for that means life to you and length of days" (Deut 30:19-20).

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