



DIOCESE OF ARLINGTON · DIOCESE OF RICHMOND
Representing the Virginia Catholic Bishops in Public Policy Matters

May 6, 2015

Bishops' Statement on Death Penalty Debate in Virginia

To build a culture of life we must respect the sanctity of even “unlovable” lives

Bishop Francis X. DiLorenzo and Bishop Paul S. Loverde issued the following statement:

This year, through the advocacy of the Virginia Catholic Conference, our Church spent considerable time opposing legislation related to the death penalty. The proposed measure would have permitted the Commonwealth to arrange with compounding pharmacies to mix drugs for use in executions, hiding from the public the identities of the pharmacies and materials used. Thankfully, this bill was defeated. So, too, was a measure the Virginia General Assembly considered last year – also opposed by the Conference – that would have forced death row inmates to be electrocuted if lethal injection drugs are not available.

Meanwhile, Pope Francis delivered a message which sharply contrasted these disturbing debates. “There is discussion in some quarters about the method of killing, as if it were possible to find ways of ‘getting it right’,” the Pope wrote in a recent letter about the death penalty. “But there is no humane way of killing another person.”

Pope Francis’ keen observation adds an exclamation point to the rejection of these “method of execution” bills. In Virginia, we are indeed having the wrong debate – a reality clearly visible in light of all we celebrate during this Easter season.

In these final joyful weeks of Easter, the Church continues to celebrate the gift of eternal life offered through the Resurrection. In our pilgrimage to that life, we follow Jesus, who loved and forgave us from the Cross, by living out the teaching of our faith that all human life is sacred, from the moment of conception until natural death.

This conviction is reflected in our understanding that the poor and vulnerable have the first claim on our consciences, in our opposition to abortion and euthanasia, and in our responsibility to welcome immigrants and refugees. But our faith also challenges us to declare sacred even the least lovable among us, those convicted of committing brutal crimes which have brought them the ultimate penalty, the penalty of death.

The Church's teaching on the death penalty is succinctly stated in a 2005 U.S. Bishops' statement, "A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death": "No matter how heinous the crime, if society can protect itself without ending a human life, it should do so." This statement is the teaching of the *Catechism*, and for decades Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis consistently have urged us to embrace it.

To be sure, this teaching challenges many people, including ourselves when we reflect on violent crimes and lives lost in senseless and unimaginable ways. The deep pain, grief, and suffering of those who have lost loved ones to violence cry out for our care and attention. More killing, though, is not the answer: The death penalty does not provide true healing for those who mourn, nor does it embody the Gospel of Life, which each of us is called to affirm even in the most difficult circumstances.

It is also important to note that people have been executed despite serious doubts about their guilt, and inmates who languished on death row for decades have been freed after their innocence was proven. Since 1973, some 152 death row inmates nationwide – including one in Virginia – have been exonerated. We must also be aware of the racial inequity inherent in the system, and that the death penalty has been administered to individuals with severe intellectual disabilities.

These circumstances further illustrate that, in Virginia and elsewhere, we are having the wrong debate. We should no longer debate which inmates we execute or how we execute them. Instead, we should debate this: If all human lives are sacred and if a civilized society such as ours can seek redress and protect itself by means other than taking a human life, why are we continuing to execute people?

By ending the use of the death penalty we would take one important step – among significant others we must take – to abandon the culture of death and embrace the culture of life.

As Pope Francis reminds us, there is no humane way of taking a life. Let us not choose whether to use lethal drugs, electric chairs, gas chambers, or firing squads. Let us take the more courageous step and choose life instead, even when it seems "unlovable."

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