

## **New Mexico Catholic Conference Opposes Death Penalty**

Replace the Death Penalty with Life Without the Possibility of Parole: A Pro-Life Issue

On Wednesday, **January 26, 2005**, the New Mexico Catholic Conference met in Santa Fe to discuss issues relating to Catholic moral teaching and public policy. During this session the three bishops of New Mexico - Most Rev. Michael Sheehan, Archbishop of the Archdiocese of Santa Fe; Most Rev. Ricardo Ramirez, CSB, Bishop of the Diocese of Las Cruces; and Most Rev. Donald E. Pelotte, SSS, Bishop of the Diocese of Gallup strongly opposed capital punishment.

The Bishops of New Mexico teach that considering New Mexico's technology, wealth, and sophisticated modern prison system, that a prisoner can be rendered harmless to society and therefore capital punishment cannot be justified in our state.

This is being affirmed through the work of the executive director of the New Mexico Catholic Conference, Allen Sanchez.

The Bishops reviewed the Catholic Church's past and present teaching on capital punishment. Following is a brief *summation* of the church's teaching regarding the death penalty which is endorsed by the three Catholic bishops of the state of New Mexico.

In their 2003, "Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility" statement, the U.S. bishops wrote:

Society has a right and duty to defend itself against violent crime and a duty to reach out to victims of crime. Yet our nation's increasing reliance on the **death penalty** cannot be justified. We do not teach that killing is wrong by killing those who kill others. Pope John Paul II has said that the penalty of death is "both cruel and unnecessary." (John Paul II, homily in St. Louis, January 27, 1999) The antidote to violence is not more violence. In light of the Holy Father's insistence that this is part of our pro-life commitment, we encourage solutions to violent crime that reflect the dignity of the human person, urging our nation to abandon the use of capital punishment.

In their September, 1991, "Political Responsibility: Revitalizing American Democracy" statement, the U.S. bishops wrote:

In view of our commitment to the value and dignity of human life, we oppose the use of capital punishment. We believe that a return to the use of the death penalty is leading to, indeed can only lead to, further erosion of respect for life in our society. We do not question society's right to punish the offender, but we believe that there are better approaches to protecting our people from violent crimes than resorting to executions. In its application, the death penalty has been discriminatory toward the poor, the indigent, and racial minorities. Our society should reject the death penalty and seek methods of dealing with violent crime which are more consistent with the Gospel vision of respect for life and Christ's message of healing love. (Community in Crime, 1978; U.S. Bishops' Statement on Capital Punishment, 1980)

This principle is set forth in the new Catechism of the Catholic Church:

If bloodless means are sufficient to defend human lives against an aggressor and to protect public order and the safety of persons, public authority must limit itself to such means, because they better correspond to the concrete conditions of the common good and are more in conformity to the dignity of the human person. (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1994, Par. 2267)

Pope John Paul II in his eleventh encyclical entitled "The Gospel of Life" (March 25, 1995), toughens the church's stance on the death penalty. In this papal letter is found one of Catholicism's strongest condemnations of capital punishment. Accordingly, part of the Catechism of the Catholic Church will have to be revised to reflect these stronger reservations about the death penalty in accordance with the Holy Father's new pro-life encyclical.

In the encyclical, the Pope listed the death penalty as one of the pro-life issues calling for church concern and action. The pontiff's stance adds to the quandary faced by Roman Catholic lawmakers and voters who endorse capital punishment. The encyclical does not address how Catholic politicians should reconcile potentially conflicting views by the church and their constituents.

The new encyclical moves the church to the brink of insisting that the fifth of the ten commandments - "Thou shalt not kill" - be applied to penal codes.

"There is a growing tendency, both in the church and in civil society, to demand that (the death penalty) be applied in a very limited way, or even that it be abolished completely," the Pope writes. (Par. 56)

While many people claim they support capital punishment because of its potential to deter other criminals, the pope does not mention deterrence as a possible justification for the death penalty. He says that capital punishment must be examined "in the context of a system of penal justice ever more in line with human dignity and thus, in the end, with God's plan for man and society." (Par. 56)

As a teaching to the faithful of New Mexico, theologically capital punishment was not justified as a form of punishment, but rather as self-defense for society. To advance the dignity of a human being we must protect life consistently be it abortion, euthanasia, or capital punishment.