



IT IS TIME TO AFFIRM LIFE WITHOUT EXCEPTION: THE DEATH PENALTY IS NOT ACCEPTABLE

(STATEMENT ISSUED APRIL 18, 2017)

Three centuries ago in the year 1722 our state of Louisiana performed its first recorded legal execution. Since that act we have dealt with this stain of the death penalty carried out by our state in the names of its citizens. This current legislative session allows us in a renewed way to move beyond this dark reality of our state's history and toward a state that affirms life without exception. Therefore the Louisiana Conference of Catholic Bishops unequivocally supports both Senator Claitor's SB 142 and Representatives Landry and Pylant's HB 101.

Saint Pope John Paul II, in his historic papal encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (*The Gospel of Life*), discussed at great length the distinction between a culture of life and a culture of death. In truth, our culture oftentimes mirrors a culture of death rather than one of life. It is clear that the use of the death penalty does not serve as an instrument to address the deep-rooted issues that are the cause of widespread violent crime within our society. Instead it is a "solution" that seduces us into believing that the taking of a life solved a problem, and in fact forces us further into a culture of death.

Saint Pope John Paul II proclaims "that not even a murderer loses his personal dignity, as God himself pledges to guarantee this. For this reason whoever attacks human life, in some way attacks God himself" (*Evangelium Vitae*, #9). In making this statement, Saint Pope John Paul II reminds us of our call to the foundational theme of Catholic Social Teaching—The Life and Dignity of the Human Person—and that we are to uphold human dignity which does not discriminate between the innocent and guilty. Given that life is valued above and beyond all else, we must advocate for an alternative to the death penalty.

Strong statements of Pope Francis echoes the foundational principles laid out by Saint Pope John Paul II's, *Evangelium Vitae*. In a 2015 letter to the president of the International Commission Against the Death Penalty, our Holy Father stated that the death penalty "is an offense against the inviolability of life and dignity of the human person, which contradicts God's plan for man and society...It does not render justice to victims, but rather fosters vengeance. For the rule of law, the death penalty represents a failure, as it obliges the state to kill in the name of justice. Justice can never be wrought by killing a human being." To this end, we must ask ourselves whether or not there is vengeance in our hearts. In many ways that which we fear—violence itself—has forced us to become proponents of violence. Just as the pursuit of justice should never be perverted by vengeance, fear should never darken the ever-shining light of life.

We remain deeply aware of the pain and grief that victims suffer, especially those who have lost a loved one through the crime of murder or crimes of violence. We pledge to deepen our commitment to persons who have suffered such violence, anguish and pain. Our opposition to the death penalty is not intended in any way to diminish what victims and their families have suffered. On the contrary it is a statement which affirms the lives of those lost and the ultimate value of life in general. The stark reality is that capital punishment fails to bring back life that has been lost. It does not provide healing, reconciliation, or even peace to those impacted. Our merciful heavenly Father does provide such things to us when we turn to Him and ask for his love to be poured out onto us.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* calls us to recognize the balance that must exist between a state which needs to protect its citizenry as well as the appropriateness of the punishment it uses to do so. "If, however, non-lethal means are sufficient to defend and protect people's safety from the aggressor, authority will limit itself to such means... Today,... the cases in which the execution of the offender is an absolute necessity are very rare, if not practically nonexistent" (CCC 2267). We believe that in Louisiana, a just alternative to the death penalty already exists. In 1979, Louisiana adopted a statute requiring all persons convicted of first degree murder to serve a life sentence without benefit of parole if they were not executed for such crimes. Therefore life imprisonment is the appropriate alternative given that it reflects a culture of life by valuing life itself.

The Louisiana Conference of Catholic Bishops asks all men and women of good faith, especially those members of the Louisiana legislature, to search their heart in an effort to seek mercy and love to support the repeal of the death penalty and aid in building a culture of life. We renew the call issued in our 1994 statement *Violence in Our Society: Death is Not the Answer*. "We must believe in the all-powerful redemptive love of God which can change hearts, convert people, and renew all things... We must be a people who see the value of a human life that others might think to be worthless. We must be a people who give praise to the God of all possibilities whose powerful Spirit of Love can renew the face of the earth." The time is upon us to affirm life without exception here within our great state of Louisiana.

