

WORLD & NATION

Bishops urge end to death penalty in the U.S.

By Patricia Zapor
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — In a Good Friday statement, the U.S. bishops urged an end to capital punishment, asking Catholics and all people of good will to preach, teach, pray and serve as witnesses against the "tragic illusion" of the death penalty.

"We oppose capital punishment not just for what it does to those guilty of horrible crimes but for what it does to all of us as a society," said the April 2 statement of the Administrative Board of the U.S. Catholic Conference.

"Increasing reliance on the death penalty diminishes all of us and is a sign of growing disrespect for human life," it continued. "We cannot overcome crime simply by executing criminals, nor can we restore the lives of the innocent by ending the lives of those convicted of their murders. The death penalty offers the tragic illusion that we can defend life by taking life."

Los Angeles Cardinal Roger M. Mahony was to release the statement in Los Angeles. He is a member of the Administrative Board and chairman of the bishops' Domestic Policy Committee.

"On this Good Friday, a day when we recall our Savior's own execution, we appeal to all people of good will and especially Catholics, to work to end the death penalty," the statement said, noting that the church's teaching on the subject has evolved.

It refers to Pope John Paul II's request to governments to stop using capital punishment in his 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* ("The Gospel of Life"), and his observation in St. Louis in January that instances where the death penalty is necessary to protect society are "very rare, if not practically nonexistent."

"Sadly, many Americans including many Catholics still support the death penalty out of understandable fear of crime and horror at so many innocent lives lost through criminal violence," the Good Friday statement said. "We hope that they will come to see, as we have, that more violence is not the answer."

The statement goes on to observe that many Catholics are at the forefront of efforts to end capital punishment through lobbying, prayerful witness at execution sites, and education.

"We seek to educate and persuade our fellow citizens that this penalty is often applied unfairly and in racially biased ways," it continued. "We stand in opposition to state laws that would permit capital punishment and federal laws that would expand it."

It also encouraged Catholics to support crime victims and their families, through compassionate response to their pain and

U.S. Executions

Number of U.S. executions for given years, following the 1976 Supreme Court decision reinstating the use of capital punishment



anger and by standing with them "as they struggle to overcome their terrible loss and find some sense of peace."

The statement refers to the increased rate of executions in many states. There are more than 3,500 people on death row and more than 500 have been executed since capital punishment was restored by the Supreme Court in 1976. In that time, there have been 74 death-row reversals late in the process.

"These numbers are deeply troubling," said the statement. "The pace of executions is numbing. The discovery of people on death row who are innocent is frightening."

It concluded by joining the pope in seeking abolition of capital punishment for the coming biblical jubilee. It asked "pastors to preach and teachers to teach about respect for all life and about the need to end the death penalty."

"Through education, through advocacy, and through prayer and contemplation on the life of Jesus, we must commit ourselves to a persistent and principled witness against the death penalty, against a culture of death and for the Gospel of life."

As the statement noted, the bishops have called for an end to the death penalty in the United States for more than 25 years. After a lengthy debate at their 1974 general meeting, the bishops issued a one-

sentence statement: "The U.S. Catholic Conference goes on record in opposition to capital punishment."

A comprehensive 1980 statement by the bishops as a whole discussed the theological and sociological background to their opposition.

Their arguments included the possibility of mistaken convictions, the bias against the poor and minorities inherent in the legal system, the inherent dignity of

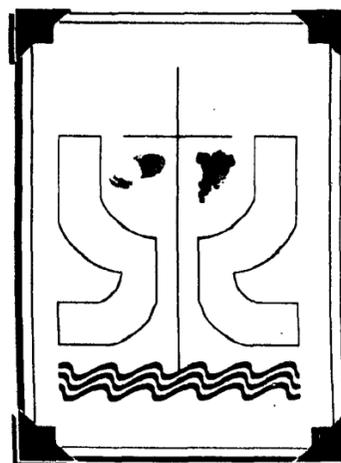
all human beings, and the value of following the example of Jesus in forgiving injustice.

Those sentiments have been echoed and expanded upon over the years in statements and pastoral letters issued by individual bishops or state Catholic conferences. They also are reflected in the USCC's and state Catholic conferences' political responsibility statements issued prior to general elections.

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Catholic Courier (USPS 135-580) Vol.
110 No. 27, April 8, 1999

Published weekly except the last
Thursday in December.
Subscription rates: single copy, 75¢; one-
year subscription in U.S., \$20.00; Canada
and foreign \$20.00 plus postage. Offices:
1150 Buffalo Road, Rochester, N.Y.
14624, 716/328-4340. Periodicals
postage paid at Rochester, N.Y.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes
to Catholic Courier, P.O. Box 24379,
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