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**Good Friday and a Moratorium on the Death Penalty**

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As we approach Palm Sunday and the celebrations of Holy Week our reflections are focused on the Passion, suffering and death of Our Lord.

The gift of our redemption is accomplished – once for all – in the death of Jesus Christ who took our sins upon Himself and unjustly went through a brutal execution. In dying for our sins, He carries us through death to new life.

For the last two and a half years I have had the privilege of serving as Chairman of the United States Bishops' Task Force for the Life and Dignity of the Human Person. One of the specific objectives that we have recommended to the bishops – as a priority – is to use this fundamental belief about the inalienable life and dignity of the human person as a unifying theme for all our efforts in defense of human life at all moments – from its inception through natural death.

So dignified and worthy of reverence is the human person that Jesus Christ determined, while we were still sinners, to lay down His life for us, that we may have life. Each human person has infinite value despite our failures and even our most horrible sins.

Today I wish to offer a plea for a moratorium on the use of the death penalty in Missouri. I know various other leaders and organizations have made similar appeals. Traditionally the U.S. Bishops have used the occasion of the commemoration of Jesus, execution on Good Friday as the moment to seek the grace of this clemency. I have joined the Missouri Bishops on more than one occasion in requesting this of our State government, and I wish to renew my petition for this relief.

Missouri has the opportunity to accomplish something very important: to pass a moratorium bill that would halt executions in our state for three years and establish a commission to study the practice of capital punishment in our state. This commission would report to the legislature, governor, attorney general, and the State Supreme Court. Currently, the Senate is considering only a study commission, while the Assembly is still considering a full moratorium bill. I urge our representatives in the Missouri Legislature to support this legislation for a full moratorium along with the study commission.

What are some of the reasons for us to do away with this ultimate and irreversible act of human justice?

The first reason is defined in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Second Edition, number 2267.

“Assuming that the guilty party's identity and responsibility have been fully determined, the traditional teaching of the Church does not exclude recourse to the death penalty, if this is the only possible way of effectively defending human lives against the unjust aggressor.

If, however, non-lethal means are sufficient to defend and protect people's safety from the aggressor, authority will limit itself to such means, as these are more in keeping with the concrete conditions of the common good and more in conformity to the dignity of the human person.

Today, in fact, as a consequence of the possibilities which the state has for effectively preventing crime, by rendering one who has committed an offense incapable of doing harm - without definitely taking away from him the possibility of redeeming himself - the cases in which the execution of the offender is an absolute necessity ‘are very rare, if not practically nonexistent.’”

The distinctions drawn here are valid and significant. Society may – indeed must – defend itself. But because we can do so without recourse to execution, we ought to do so through non-lethal means. The just use of Capital Punishment is not an intrinsic evil (as are abortion and euthanasia, which can never be justified). But the use of the Death Penalty is a practical moral evil if we can assure the common good without resorting to it.

A secondary, but important reason why we should immediately stop executions is the ample evidence of its occasional mistaken application. It has been shown that sometimes persons on death row are not guilty of capital offenses. We ought not to proceed with the business of State-sponsored execution if it remains a possibility that we may make a fatal miscarriage of justice.

The dignity and value of every human life is sorely offended when violent men and women take the lives of innocent victims. The supreme loss of the life of a victim, and the inestimable hurt of family and loved ones who experience that loss in a continuing way, is perhaps the most difficult element to reconcile in our consideration of the repeal of the death penalty. For this I have no facile response. We know well that the execution of a rightly-convicted offender cannot bring back the life of a loved one unjustly taken from us.

As we approach in faith the events of our redemption in Christ, which will reach a certain climax in Christ's saving death on the first Good Friday, I pray that the horrific image and life-giving power of Christ's death will help us see the value of letting this extraordinary practice fade into our history. May God give us some peace in seeking a different path to justice.

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Many of our parishes are conducting a postcard campaign to contact our State legislators urging them to support the moratorium legislation. If you would like to participate in the postcard campaign, please contact Jude Huntz, director of the Human Rights Office, at (816) 756-1858, ext. 534 or [huntz@diocesekcsj.org](mailto:huntz@diocesekcsj.org)

You can find the contact information for your representatives on our Website at [http://www.diocese-kcsj.org/content/offices\\_and\\_agencies/human\\_rights/advocacy/](http://www.diocese-kcsj.org/content/offices_and_agencies/human_rights/advocacy/)