



THE SISTERS OF ST. FRANCIS OF PHILADELPHIA

“I renew the appeal I made most recently at Christmas for a consensus to end the death penalty, which is both cruel and unnecessary.”

Pope John Paul II, January 27, 1999, St. Louis, MO

“The antidote to violence is love, not more violence.”

USCC, “Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics,” 1998

“And in greeting others, let them say, “God give you peace.”...As they announce peace with their lips, let them be careful to have it even more in their own hearts.”

The Rule and Life of the Brothers and Sisters of the Third Order Regular of St. Francis, Articles 20 and 30

SISTERS TAKE CORPORATE STAND AGAINST THE DEATH PENALTY (1999)

The Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia voted to take a corporate stand against the death penalty, a stand firmly grounded in Catholic social teaching and in their Franciscan heritage and tradition. In the past the position of the Catholic Church on capital punishment was more ambiguous than on other life issues. Since 1980, however, the U.S. bishops have spoken out as individuals and as a body against state-sanctioned killing. The “consistent ethic of life” articulated by Cardinal Joseph Bernardin in 1989 provided a framework for all issues involving defense of human life and rejection of violence. Perhaps no Church leader has spoken with greater clarity against the death penalty than Pope John Paul II. His appeal for the life of convicted murderer Darrell Mease in January 1999, made media headlines and spurred the U.S. bishops to issue an administrative statement, “A Good Friday Appeal to End the Death Penalty.” The pope’s call also motivated Equal Justice USA to undertake the “Moratorium Now!” Campaign, which includes a “Model Catholic Resolution” signed, as of July 12, 1999, by more than 500 groups, including the leadership team of the Sisters of St. Francis.

This corporate stand is one more concrete way of affirming our belief in nonviolence and to “take the necessary steps to be a healing, compassionate presence in our violent world, especially with...those who have no voice.” We acknowledge the emotional challenge of this issue. Our corporate stand in no way condones or tries to mitigate the often heinous crimes of murder which must not go unpunished. Nor does it ignore the need to reach out with compassion to families and friends of victims. It does affirm the innate dignity of all human life, even the life of one who commits an evil act, and calls for an end to state-sanctioned murder. We also recognize that, as the numerous exonerations in recent years evidence, innocent persons are sometimes convicted of murder and that biases and prejudices are sometimes factors in our judicial system.

RATIONALE

We would like to share with you a sampling of the rationale which was given in support of a corporate stand on the death penalty.

- All human beings are created in God's image.
- The issue of abolition is a human rights issue.
- We cannot teach that killing is wrong by killing.
- The imposition of the death penalty is racially and economically biased.
- Capital punishment is not a deterrent to crime.
- Capital punishment can kill innocent people and accelerates the cycle of violence.
- The U.S. is one of the few countries in the world that supports capital punishment.
- Today's society and our judicial/penal system can provide safety for citizens without resorting to capital punishment.

STATEMENT

"We, the Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia, following in the footprints of the nonviolent Jesus and the peacemaking tradition of Francis of Assisi, join Pope John Paul II, the Catholic bishops, and many others in calling for an end to the death penalty." (October 1999)

ACTION STEPS

- We will pray for the abolition of capital punishment and for those facing execution, for their victims, for the families of both perpetrators and victims, and for all involved with the executions.
- We will educate ourselves about capital punishment and its alternatives, as well as about the differences between restorative and retributive justice.
- We will use congregational communication systems (newsletters, website, intranet) to remain updated about issues and alerts relevant to the issue of abolition.
- We will advocate with legislators, both local and national, calling for abolition.
- We will investigate and utilize systems to share the message about abolition to a broader audience (blogs, YouTube, social networking systems).
- We will become members of national organizations such as the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty.
- We will provide a presence at national gatherings such as the annual conference of the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty.
- We will encourage our members to work locally to share our corporate stand, to educate those with whom we minister about the cause of abolition, and, when possible, to work with local abolition groups.
- We will share our resources with organizations working for abolition of capital punishment, e.g., through our social justice grants.