

ROMAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS IN JAMAICA CAUTION PARLIAMENTARIANS ON CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

Press release

More rage than light has taken centre-stage in the discussions on the death penalty. Reasonable arguments have been put forth to caution against capital punishment: (1) elsewhere in crime-ridden cities, capital punishment has not been a deterrent; (2) DNA testing has shown that innocent persons have been executed or jailed for a major portion of their lives; (3) the sanctioning of the death penalty by government adds to the escalation of the culture of violence and death as opposed to a culture of life. These enlightened arguments have been drowned in the rage and fear that prevail.

Given the foregoing, the three Catholic Bishops in Jamaica wish to caution parliamentarians against opting for a culture of death. In the "Conscience Vote" that will be taken either to uphold or abolish capital punishment, we exhort you to let light triumph over rage. Let the understanding of the human person as dynamic (not static) contribute to the ongoing formation of your conscience. We appreciate the tension you feel in representing your constituents (the majority of whom might be in favour of the death penalty) as opposed to an enlightened leadership that ought to surmount the mentality of fear and revenge of the many. We remind you that it was enlightened leadership that successfully countered the mentality of the many to retain slavery and apartheid that marred the dignity of the human person.

The position of the Catholic Church regarding the death penalty, though not popular, is quite clear. In our Pastoral Letter, "On Capital Punishment" [November 2000], we sympathise with the victims of violence: ***"In the present crisis of violent crime and increasing public disorder, many of our people face personal and social dangers. We share the pain of the victims***

of the many forms of human brutality... As Christ's disciples, united to him as brothers and sisters, we also burn with compassion, and we cry out for justice. So, our first sentiments go out to those who suffer the loss of loved ones, and to those who have been raped and injured. It will be years before they are healed of bitterness and deep sorrow. However, contrary to what many feel, snuffing out the lives of the perpetrators is too easy an answer. Restitution and reconciliation will never be obtained by the taking of lives in revenge. This is where our parliamentarians need to think outside the box and look again at the whole penal system that will include restorative justice, reconciliation, and rehabilitation.

We are concerned with the strident voices of some of our parliamentarians. Our Pastoral Letter reminds them thus: ***"In the case of the call by some politicians for the resumption of execution, we have grave concerns that use is being made of the climate of fear and uninformed popular desire for revenge in order to promote personal political agendas. While democratically elected state officials are obliged on the one hand to represent the will of their constituents, they are likewise entrusted with the protection of the common good through policies and services that educate and develop the communities they serve. We severely reproach, therefore, politicians who employ populist rhetoric, at the expense of the moral order and genuine social development, in order to protect and advance their own political careers. The call for capital punishment should not become simply a means for furthering personal popularity among voters.... The gravity of state execution, the taking of life, makes political posturing of this kind a grievous offence against the common good."***

As you, our parliamentarians attend to the common good, which is tantamount to the promotion of the culture of life in all its forms, we commend you to God for the wisdom, understanding, and fortitude from on high, so that you will do the right thing as you vote according to your ***informed*** conscience on the death penalty.