

**Statement on
CAPITAL
PUNISHMENT**

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President
National Conference
of Catholic Bishops**

January 26, 1977

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by

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Capital punishment involves profound legal and political questions; it also touches upon important moral and religious concerns. In 1974, the United States Catholic Conference declared its opposition to the reinstatement of capital punishment. Since that time a number of individual bishops, State Catholic Conferences and other Catholic organizations have actively opposed the death penalty. Many have expressed the view that in this day of increasing violence and disregard for human life, a return to the use of capital punishment can only lead to further erosion of respect for life and to the increased brutalization of our society.

At the same time, crime in our society cannot be ignored; criminals must be brought to justice. Concern for human life also requires reaffirmation of the belief that violent crime is a most serious matter. It calls for seeking effective ways to prevent crime, insuring swift and certain punishment for its perpetrators, the reform of the criminal justice system, and steps to eliminate the complex causes of crime in our society.

I do not challenge society's right to punish the capital offender, but I would ask all to

examine the question of whether there are other and better approaches to protecting our people from violent crimes than resorting to executions. In particular I ask those who advocate the use of capital punishment to reflect prayerfully upon all the moral dimensions of the issue. It is not so much a matter of whether an argument can be advanced in favor of the death penalty; such arguments have already been forcefully made by many people of evident good will, although others find them less than convincing. But the more pertinent question at this time in our history is what course of action best fosters that respect for life, all human life, in a society such as ours in which such respect is sadly lacking. In my view, more destruction of human life is not what America needs in 1977.

The Catholic bishops of the United States have manifested deep commitment to the intrinsic value and sacredness of human life. This has led to our strong efforts on behalf of the unborn, the old, the sick and victims of injustice, as well as efforts to enhance respect for human rights. While there are significant differences in these issues, all of them touch directly upon the value of human life which our faith teaches us is never beyond redemption. It is for this reason that I hope our leaders will seek methods of dealing with crime that are more consistent with the vision of respect for life and the Gospel message of God's healing love.

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