

Bishop praises lawmakers for vote to abolish death penalty

WASHINGTON - Bishop John M. Smith of Trenton, N.J., said Dec. 14 he was pleased New Jersey legislators voted to abolish the death penalty, but said he would not have a "triumphalist attitude about it" because capital punishment is such a sensitive issue.

Members of the General Assembly voted Dec. 13 to end the death penalty in their state, four days after the measure was approved by the state Senate. Gov. Jon Corzine signed it into law Dec. 17.

In remarks at the state capitol, Corzine said the decision to abolish the death penalty in the state demonstrated that "New Jersey is truly evolving."

He said a fundamental argument against the death penalty is for society to "determine if its endorsement of violence begets violence, and if violence undermines our commitment to the sanctity of life."

The governor also issued an order to commute the sentences of the eight men on the state's death row to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

He thanked advocacy groups, naming the New Jersey Catholic Conference and the American Civil Liberties Union among others, for their efforts "that put pressure on those of us in public service to stand up and do the right thing."

He also noted that the state Legislature "showed courageous leadership" with its decision.

Bishop Smith, who testified before state lawmakers to oppose capital punishment, likewise said the legislators showed "a great deal of courage" to take an unpopular position against the death penalty.

In a phone interview with Catholic News Service, he said the state will not be the first to abolish the death penalty, but the first to stop its use since the U.S. Supreme

Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976 after a three-year suspension. The practice was reinstated in New Jersey in 1982, but no one has been executed by the state since 1963.

Currently 37 states have capital punishment.

Bishop Smith told CNS he hoped the state's decision to repeal the death penalty and replace it with life in prison would encourage other states to pass similar measures.

He credited the combined efforts of lawmakers and a coalition of lobbyists - including law enforcement officials and representatives of religious groups who testified against capital punishment - with helping the measure secure the necessary votes for passage.

The bishop noted that many people who testified were family members of victims of "horrible murders." Family members were on both sides of the issue, he said; some felt the death penalty was justified, and others said the appeals process for the convicted murderer involved them in so much litigation they could never resume normal lives and did not experience the closure they sought.

Bishop Smith said he was pleased to be in the coalition speaking up against the death penalty, noting that "there is confusion in the church" over this issue.

He said the U.S. Catholic bishops have been actively campaigning against the death penalty since 2005. Since then, New Jersey's Catholic bishops have issued three statements opposing it. He said the statements mainly tried to get across the message that the death penalty "takes human life and should be abolished."

In a Dec. 10 statement Bishop Smith delivered to the General Assembly, he said the Catholic Church is guided by its belief "that every person has an inalienable right to life."

The bishop, quoting a statement released by the New Jersey Catholic Conference in Trenton and signed by the state's bishops, described capital punishment as "controversial, emotional and not an easy matter to address," particularly for victims' families, who "suffer with their loss through the years."

While he affirms the state's duty to "punish criminals and to prevent the repetition or occurrence of crime," he said he also believes "greater efforts must be made to bring the criminal to repentance and rehabilitation."

Elsewhere in the country in 2007, bills to abolish the death penalty failed to get enough votes in Montana, New Mexico, Nebraska and Colorado, according to the Death Penalty Information Center in Washington.

In 2005, New Jersey enacted a moratorium on carrying out the death penalty while a commission examined the justice system for fairness and accuracy.