

Bishops urge Washington governor to commute inmate's death sentence

SEATTLE - The Catholic bishops of Washington state have asked Gov. Christine Gregoire to commute the death sentence for Darold Stenson and give him life imprisonment without parole.

In 1993 Mr. Stenson, now 55, was found guilty of aggravated murder in the shooting deaths of his wife and a business partner. His execution by lethal injection was scheduled for Dec. 3.

"As we continue to pray for those that have suffered due to Mr. Stenson's crimes, we ask that you commute his death sentence in favor of a punishment that preserves public safety while honoring God's law of justice and forgiveness," the bishops said in a Nov. 21 letter to the governor.

The letter, released Nov. 24 by the communications office of the Seattle Archdiocese, was signed by Archbishop Alex J. Brunett of Seattle and Bishops William S. Skylstad of Spokane and Carlos A. Sevilla of Yakima.

Archbishop Brunett is the chairman of the Washington State Catholic Conference, the public policy arm of the state's bishops.

In their letter the bishops told Gov. Gregoire that "clearly the state has an obligation both to hold criminals accountable for their actions and to protect society from the threat of violence." They said they understand "the burden" she carries "to uphold the law while also considering the propriety of an execution."

But "while acknowledging the incalculable pain and suffering inflicted by Darold Stenson's violent crime," they said the "state-sponsored taking of life sadly continues the cycle of violence by further eroding our common respect for the fundamental dignity of human life."

"True justice requires an evenness of heart, a counterbalance of mercy, lest we destroy our ability to recognize actions that, despite good intentions, lead us towards increased inhumanity to each other," the bishops told the governor.

"Violence begets violence both in our hearts and in our actions," he said, and by responding to murder with state-sanctioned killing, "we rob ourselves of moral consistency and perpetuate that which we seek to sanction."

They quoted Pope John Paul II, who "resolutely called for the abolition of capital punishment" except in case where the public safety was threatened, cases he said are "so rare as to be practically nonexistent."

A spokesman for the governor told Catholic News Service Nov. 25 that Gov. Gregoire "respects the procedural process that is under way" in Stenson's case and would have no further comment "at this time."