

Letter to Governor Ehrlich

The Honorable Robert L. Ehrlich, Jr.
State House
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Dear Governor Ehrlich:

We come to you about the matter of capital punishment and the prospect of yet another Maryland execution of an individual who has been found guilty of the crime of murder. We write to encourage the application of your mercy to that individual.

As we trust you do, we approach the controversial question of capital punishment with profound regret and pain that is deeply felt. Our regret derives from the frustration we share with all law-abiding people at the senseless and brutal crimes that more and more frequently disrupt the harmony of society and strike fear into the hearts and minds of its members. Our pain is the pain all people of good will share with those who suffer the awful consequences of violent crime, particularly the relatives of victims, who have our sympathy and both need and deserve the prayers and compassionate support of their communities.

Our petition in the present matter proceeds from the context of faith as expressed in traditional and contemporary Catholic teaching.

The traditional teaching of our Church recognizes that “Legitimate public authority and the duty to inflict punishment proportionate to the gravity of the offense.” [Catechism of the Catholic Church (1997), no. 2266] This teaching continues to the present day, but in the present day is applied to a society in which increasing violence manifests a growing disrespect for human life. The violence stems from many causes, among them the breakdown of the family, the terrible snare of illegal

drugs, the failure of our institutions to lift up positive moral values, and the entertainment media's glorification of violence.

Framing the issue in this faith context, we are concerned that capital punishment further advances a destructive anti-life attitude. The question confronting us today is not whether the state may impose the death penalty, but whether it should. Does capital punishment help or harm society?

More than two decades ago, the Catholic bishops of the United States asked a similar question and concluded, in the context of our times, that the death penalty should be abolished. In accordance with this conviction, we consistently have opposed capital punishment as being inappropriate. We also view it as unnecessary to the legitimate purposes of punishment. Such measures as life sentences without the possibility of parole do not involve the taking of life. They would prevent criminals from continuing to commit serious crimes, protect the public order and personal security, and redress injustices suffered by victims of crime and their loved ones.

His Holiness John Paul II affirms this view in his 1995 encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae* [The Gospel of Life]. Citing the Catechism of the Catholic Church, he says that "If bloodless means are sufficient to defend human lives against an aggressor and to protect public order and the safety of persons, public authority must limit itself to such means, because they better correspond to the concrete conditions of the common good and are more in conformity to the dignity of the human person." [Evangelium Vitae, 56] As you know, life without parole has been a sentencing option in Maryland death-penalty proceedings since 1989.

In our own statement of capital punishment issued nearly four years ago, the Catholic bishops serving Maryland acknowledged that some are likely to disagree with our position in this most complex matter. We encouraged them to reflect

prayerfully on the implications of capital punishment in today's world, as we work toward a time when the lives of the innocent will be protected without taking the lives of the guilty. We urged our people and our neighbors to consider the total "culture of death" in contemporary society and to seek a return to values which, in individuals, families, schools, and communities, will emb