

# Missouri groups seek moratorium on executions

ST. LOUIS - Missourians to Abolish the Death Penalty is calling for the state's General Assembly to enact a three-year moratorium on executions in the state and to create a commission to examine the death penalty system.

Nearly 300 groups in the state, including the four Catholic dioceses and numerous parishes, have endorsed a moratorium. On Good Friday last year the Missouri bishops issued a pastoral letter opposing executions, stating that more violence "is not a solution to society's problems."

In the assembly's 2006 session a bill calling for a moratorium and study commission was introduced, but the measure did not advance to a vote. Similar bills in previous years met the same fate.

Missourians to Abolish the Death Penalty is a group with several Catholics on its board, including Rita Linhardt, staff specialist in criminal justice and the death penalty at the Missouri Catholic Conference. Barbara Poe, board chairwoman, said that in 2006 there were no executions in Missouri.

In June, U.S. District Judge Fernando Gaitan Jr. ruled that Missouri's lethal injection system is unconstitutional and stopped the state from doing further executions. The decision is currently under appeal.

Medical groups in Missouri have also opposed lethal injection, calling it contrary to the ethics of the profession for medical personnel to assist in an execution.

Executions were suspended in Florida last December after it took 34 minutes for a prisoner to die after his first lethal injection was botched and a second injection had to be given.

The U.S. Supreme Court Jan. 17 heard appeals on the death penalty in three Texas cases, one of which had been before the high court previously. All three cases involved sentences handed down more than 15 years ago, before Supreme Court

decisions that required juries to consider mitigating circumstances before sentencing.

Ms. Poe said her organization looks forward “to a time when Missouri’s criminal justice system is just and fair and protects us from crime without engaging in the very violence it seeks to prevent.”

She said the death penalty is applied in a racially discriminatory way, traumatizes friends and family of the murder victims and wastes taxpayers’ money.

The Missouri bishops have urged Catholics to contact their elected officials to advocate for a halt in executions.

The bishops’ 2006 letter summarized church teaching and discussed the Catholic Campaign to End the Use of the Death Penalty, a national campaign started by the U.S. bishops in 2005. It also pointed to the late Pope John Paul II’s call to be unconditionally pro-life and affirmed a commitment to support victims and their families.

A sentence of death offers the illusion of closure and vindication, the bishops stated, “but no act, even an execution, can bring back a loved one or heal terrible wounds. The pain and loss of one death cannot be wiped away by another death.”

A report issued by the New Jersey Death Penalty Study Commission - which included two prosecutors, a police chief, the state attorney general, representatives of victims organizations and legal experts - has recommended that New Jersey repeal its death penalty statute.

The commission found flaws in a wide variety of areas including the risks of executing an innocent person; geographic disparities and uneven application; the negative impact on victims’ families and the high costs of the death penalty, as compared with sentencing to life without parole. The commission recommended that New Jersey replace the death penalty with life without parole and that any cost saving be used for benefits and services for survivors of victims of homicide.

Deacon Larry Weber, executive director of the Missouri Catholic Conference, said the Missouri General Assembly should carefully consider the recommendations of

the New Jersey report.

“The New Jersey report gives a scathing indictment of the death penalty system and uncovered gross flaws and problems that are common to other states as well,” he said. “New Jersey’s system is just like Missouri and other states in that it is run by fallible human beings who sometimes make mistakes even under the best of circumstances.”

The U.S. Catholic bishops have publicly opposed the use of the death penalty in the United States since 1980.

Broad global church opposition to its use grew significantly during the papacy of Pope John Paul II, who frequently intervened to seek clemency for death-row inmates and argued that the death penalty should be used rarely, if ever, in modern societies that have other means to protect society from even the worst criminals.

One of the few cases in which Pope John Paul pleaded successfully against an execution occurred in Missouri in 1999. The pope called the death penalty “cruel and unnecessary” during a stop in St. Louis and personally asked Missouri Gov. Mel Carnahan to commute the death sentence of inmate Darrell Mease, which the governor did.