

# **New network launched to mobilize Catholics against death penalty**

HARRISBURG, Pa. – The Catholic Mobilizing Network to End the Death Penalty, launched Jan. 25 in Harrisburg, is not just another initiative of the bishops but instead represents lay Catholics at the grass-roots level “taking up the challenge” put forth in bishops’ documents, statements and actions over the past three decades.

That’s how John Carr, executive director of the Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, described the network at a news conference at the close of a training conference of the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty in Harrisburg.

The network, which will operate independently from the USCCB, will be designed particularly to reach out to young people and Hispanic Catholics on the issue of capital punishment. It was begun with seed money from the Sisters of St. Joseph of Medaille, whose best-known member is death penalty abolitionist Sister Helen Prejean.

Sister Helen, the author of “Dead Man Walking” who speaks frequently at college campuses, said she has seen “how hungry” students are “to participate in substantive exchanges on important issues.”

Saying that many students are “looking for soul-sized activities,” she said they might be encouraged to visit prisons, write to death-row inmates and reach out to the family members of murder victims through the network.

“It’s about summoning people, educating them and moving people to action,” Sister Helen said.

Catholic teaching opposes the use of the death penalty in nearly every circumstance, since society has other adequate means to protect its citizens.

Although the Catechism of the Catholic Church says that “the traditional teaching of the church does not exclude recourse to the death penalty, if this is the only possible

way of effectively defending human lives against the unjust aggressor,” it quotes Pope John Paul II as saying that “the cases in which the execution of the offender is an absolute necessity ‘are very rare, if not practically nonexistent.’”

Among the others speaking at the Harrisburg news conference were Marietta Jaeger Lane, a Catholic whose faith led her to forgive the man who kidnapped, raped and killed her 7-year-old daughter in 1973; Karen Clifton, who chairs the steering committee of the new network; and Diann Rust-Tierney, executive director of the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty.

Ms. Lane said that when her daughter Susie was killed, she “would have been happy to kill the kidnapper with my bare hands.” But she eventually came to realize that “however horribly he might have behaved with my daughter, he was a son of God too,” she added. “God calls us to say yes to life and no to death.”

Ms. Clifton said she became involved in working against the death penalty while living in Texas, where 424 people have been executed since 1976, more than four times the number in any other U.S. state.

She said the network will have a page on the social networking site Facebook, as well as a cutting-edge Web site with educational materials in English and Spanish on the death penalty and church teachings about it. Such tools as infomercials and podcasts also are planned, she said.

Governor Martin J. O’Malley supports the repeal of the death penalty in Maryland.