

# Supreme Court lifts stay of execution in Virginia man's case

WASHINGTON - The commonwealth of Virginia ranks second to Texas when it comes to the number of executions carried out since 1976, the year the U.S. Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty.

Now, after a Supreme Court ruling May 19, Virginia will have three more executions in the near future, raising concern from the Catholic community.

The first two were previously scheduled, one for May 27 and another for June 10. Christopher Scott Emmett was added to that list when the Supreme Court lifted a stay on his execution, though Virginia officials have not set the date.

Emmett challenged Virginia's lethal injection method, claiming that the commonwealth failed to supply enough anesthetic prior to injecting the lethal drugs. In 2001 Emmett was charged with capital murder and robbery for attacking and killing his former co-worker in Danville, Va.

Jeff Caruso, executive director of the Virginia Catholic Conference, said the court's ruling prompted his concern about "the bigger picture." Caruso cited the fact that Virginia has had 98 executions since 1976, which is second only to Texas' 405.

"Compared to other states, Virginia is moving in a different direction," he added.

Last year the death penalty was abolished in New Jersey, partially due to a joint letter calling for such a move by the bishops of the state. There are other states beginning to take steps toward abolishing the death penalty. Still other states may not be actively pursuing the abolition of the death penalty, but they are not sentencing convicted criminals to death but to life in prison.

"The church supports a right to life from conception to natural death," stated Steve Neill, director of communications and editor of The Catholic Virginian for the Diocese of Richmond.

Mr. Caruso also noted that “the death penalty cannot be justified when nonlethal means are sufficient to protect society.” In addition to the death penalty, Virginia legislation also allows for a life sentence without parole.

Through the Catholic conference, the public policy arm of the state’s Catholic bishops, the two Catholic dioceses of Virginia have been working to raise awareness about the death penalty in the state.

For the past 25 years members of the dioceses have been participating in an event known as Advocacy Day. On this day in January members of the dioceses head to Richmond, the state capital, where they meet with their state representatives to discuss issues, with the death penalty among them.

In April 2007, Virginia Bishops Francis X. DiLorenzo of Richmond and Paul S. Loverde of Arlington wrote a commentary that appeared in The Washington Post. It specifically referred to some legislation passed at the time by Virginia state legislators expanding the circumstances under which the death penalty could be the sentence.

The bishops stated, “Virginians and their elected officials continue to apply the accelerator to a system of punishment that kills to teach that killing is wrong.”

In previous capital cases, the bishops, the Virginia Catholic Conference and others all have written letters to the governor requesting the sentence be commuted. There also have been prayer vigils held outside prisons to show the church’s opposition to capital punishment.