

**STATEMENT OF  
MOST REVEREND JOHN M. SMITH  
BISHOP OF CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF TRENTON**

**NEW JERSEY DEATH PENALTY STUDY COMMISSION HEARING  
July 19, 2006**

I appear before you today on behalf of the Catholic Bishops of New Jersey to signify our belief that the death penalty is not consistent with evolving standards of decency. Because the State of New Jersey has other means to redress the injustice caused by crime and to effectively prevent crime by rendering the one who has committed the offense incapable of doing harm and because we recognize the dignity of all human life, we continue to consistently and vigorously oppose the use of the death penalty. The Catholic Bishops of our state spoke to this issue most recently in their statement of February 4, 2005 which is set forth later in this statement. On Holy Thursday of 2005, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops launched a new campaign to end capital punishment in the United States, stating: "The death penalty diminishes all of us. Its use ought to be abandoned not only for what it does to those who are executed, but what it does to us as a society. We cannot teach respect for life by taking life."

According to a December 2004 Zogby International survey of 1,700 American Catholics, only 48% of American Catholics now support the death penalty. When given a choice, the majority of *New Jerseyans* who regularly attend religious services (54%) prefer life without parole over the death penalty for murder. While I am encouraged by these poll numbers, I believe that the trend against the imposition of the death penalty will grow in our community as people learn and grow in their understanding that the death penalty is inconsistent with standards of decency.

**STATEMENT OF THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS OF NEW JERSEY ON THE DEATH PENALTY**

As death row inmates exhaust their appeals and the possibility of execution draws near, we, the Catholic Bishops of New Jersey, wish to reiterate our opposition to the death penalty. We are guided by our belief that every person has an inalienable right to life, because each human being is made in the image and likeness of God, who alone is the absolute Lord of life from its beginning until its end (cf. The Book of Genesis 1:26-28).

We acknowledge that the subject of capital punishment is controversial and emotional. All murders are violent and shocking; some are savage. They all stir emotions of revulsion and anger. We grieve for the victims of murder, for the brutalization and loss of life. We commiserate with the families and friends of victims who must suffer with their loss through the years. We affirm that the state has the duty to punish criminals and to prevent the repetition or occurrence of crime. We believe that greater efforts must be made to bring the criminal to repentance and rehabilitation. We believe that our society is sufficiently developed to protect itself and to redress the injustice caused by the criminal without resorting to the use of the death penalty. One alternative is life without possibility of parole.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* acknowledges the right of public authorities to impose criminal punishment proportionate to the gravity of the offense, "if this is the only possible way of effectively defending human lives against the unjust aggressor. If, however, non-lethal means are sufficient to defend and protect people's safety from the aggressor, authority will limit itself to such means, as these are more in keeping with the concrete conditions of the common good and more in conformity with the dignity of the human person." Pope John Paul II has stated that in today's world cases in which the execution of the offender is an absolute necessity "are very rare, if not practically non-existent." (*The Gospel of Life*, 56)

Because the State of New Jersey has other means to redress the injustice caused by crime and to effectively prevent crime by rendering the one who has committed the offense incapable of doing harm and because we recognize the dignity of all human life, we continue to consistently and vigorously oppose the use of capital punishment. We recognize the continued need for improvement of our criminal justice system and for a greater societal commitment to crime prevention and victim assistance. As pastors and teachers we urge the State of New Jersey not to impose the death penalty in our state.

Most Rev. John J. Myers  
Archbishop of Newark

Most Reverend Andrew Pataki  
Bishop of the Byzantine Catholic Eparchy Of Passaic

Most Reverend Joseph A. Galante  
Bishop of Camden

Most Reverend Joseph Younan  
Bishop of Our Lady of Deliverance Diocese

Most Reverend Paul G. Bootkoski  
Bishop of Metuchen

Most Reverend Edgar M. da Cunha  
Auxiliary Bishop of Newark

Most Reverend Arthur J. Serratelli  
Bishop of Paterson

Most Reverend Thomas A. Donato  
Auxiliary Bishop of Newark

Most Reverend John M. Smith  
Bishop of Trenton

Most Reverend John W. Flesey  
Auxiliary Bishop of Newark