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Testimony of Jane J. Chiles Executive Director

Before the Interim Joint Judiciary
of the Kentucky General Assembly
October 16, 2001

Good Morning, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, my name is Jane Chiles and I am the Executive Director of the Catholic Conference of Kentucky, the public policy arm of the Roman Catholic bishops in the Commonwealth.

I bring to you a message from the bishops of their resolve to end the killing of children, and the mentally retarded in the name of false justice. A critical element of the mission of the Catholic Conference is to speak for society's most vulnerable. Who is more vulnerable than our children and the mentally retarded?

Ours is a message that may have sounded counter-cultural, but if you listen to the winds, they are shifting. Kentuckians are fair people. They want a system that protects the public and holds accountable those who commit murder. Life without possibility of parole does just that without the flaws associated with the application of the death penalty.

The commitment of Kentucky's bishops to abolition of the death penalty is solid and full of energy. Therefore, the Catholic Conference will continue to urge this judiciary committee and all members of the legislature to restore credibility to our justice system by abolishing this broken part.

Too often, well-intentioned policy-makers have offered the death penalty, with all its flaws, as the ultimate remedy for the pain and suffering of victims and their families.

Some of you may recall in our past conversations that you told me, if it happened to your loved one, you'd feel differently. Frankly, I have even allowed myself to wonder about that.

I now have an answer for myself and for you. This morning, I became the newest member of Kentucky Murder Victims Families for Reconciliation.

My 26-year old nephew, Scott Johnson, was a victim of one of the most horrific crimes ever to occur on U.S. soil. Scotty was murdered on September 11, 2001, while working on the 89th floor of the World Trade Center. In fact, Scotty's floor in the South Tower took the direct hit.

As the nightmarish news began to unfold, I began a journey of many emotions. I have felt pain, fear, fleeting hope, sinking despair, the depths of sadness which I never felt before.

I have felt such pain for my 89-year old father whose family was directly struck by the evil of terrorism. He should not have to deal with such complex tragedy at this stage of his life.

My emotions remain raw – and I struggle with living in a conflicted country that seeks revenge and kills in an effort to teach that killing is wrong.

Scotty is gone. My family is in deep mourning. We are changed, but more killing will only perpetuate the cycle of violence. This does not mean we do not want his killers or any other killers held accountable. We certainly do.

But taking another life is not the answer. I have always believed that life belongs to God alone. And I believe that even more so today. Don't think you have to kill for me.

Deliberately destroying human life is always a terrible thing, whether it's an individual, a group of terrorists, or the State of Kentucky doing the killing. The abolition movement in Kentucky recognizes the unspeakable, unbearable things for which death row inmates have been convicted. Abolitionists recognize the terrible suffering of the victims' families. And I now know it personally.

Our first and our final point to you is that we know what these murderers are, the ones who are truly guilty.

We know the horrible things they have done. But what they have done is not the only issue here. The question now before you is not only about what they are - A more important question is this: who are we and what should we be doing.

The witnesses supporting the death penalty will most likely describe horrible and cruel murders. We are with them in condemning these atrocities. But these murders have been committed for reasons most of us can not fathom, and they are done - and now the question is should we match them, killing for killing - or is there a better more responsible way to stop the cycle of killing. Our testimony is that there is.

Don't think you have to kill.

For Scotty

For me.

Or for any of us.

Thank you.



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