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Deacon Community Statement on Capital Punishment

Archdiocese of Louisville

"Increasingly our society looks to violent measures to deal with some of our most difficult problems including increased reliance on the death penalty to deal with crime. Violence is not the solution; it is the most clear sign of our failures We cannot teach that killing is wrong by killing."(1)

We, the Deacon Community of the Archdiocese of Louisville, Kentucky, reflecting on the wide-spread and escalating use of the death penalty in our nation, are sadly aware of the crippling effect of violent crime on the safety, freedom and well-being of the citizens of our Commonwealth and of our nation. Children are killing children; the elderly are locking themselves into their homes; many citizens do not feel free to walk the streets of their own neighborhood day or night; and some of the crimes being committed are so brutal and inhumane as to warrant questions about the humanity of the perpetrators. Feelings of fear, anger, and revenge are fueled in such a hostile climate, often leading to demands for the death of the perpetrators. Such feelings are understandable, especially when the crimes are particularly shocking and senseless. It is our belief, however, that responding to violence with violence is self-defeating and never achieves a worthy goal.

Violence against another human being is in direct opposition to the Christian mandate of love, reconciliation and forgiveness between offender and offended. Furthermore, it violates one of the basic principles of Christian faith, that all life, guilty and innocent, is sacred in the eyes of God, and the willful destruction of human life by individuals or by the State dishonors rather than reverences the inherent dignity and value of human life.

In a reissue of their 1984 pastoral letter on the death penalty, the Catholic Bishops of Kentucky wrote: **"we see our rejection of capital punishment as part of the Church's opposition to every attack on human life. It is in line with the struggle against abortion, against euthanasia, against the destruction of nuclear war. We proclaim the sacredness not only of innocent life but even the life of the guilty".**(2)

Reflecting on the U.S. Bishops Pastoral plan for Pro-life Activities, the Kentucky bishops

noted in their pastoral letter the need for Catholics and the wider community **"to rethink traditional attitudes and values, to undertake a prayerful and studied reconsideration of their position, and to seek to discover more deeply what the Lord Jesus is calling us to in the modern age."** (3)

The Bishops further noted their conviction that capital punishment is one of the many issues that need Christian attention in our time to assure **"internal consistence in the pro-life commitment."** (3)

We, the Deacon Community, concur with and affirm the position of our Bishops and offer these closing thoughts:

Support for the death penalty does not, as some would claim, reflect society's respect for human life; it is a reflection of respect for the lives of selected groups only. Furthermore, support for the death penalty presumes that persons judged guilty of serious crimes are not worthy of forgiveness and the transforming power of God's unconditional love. This presumption is anti-Gospel and rejects God's power to redeem and transform even the worst of sinners, in God's time and when God wills it to be so.

Often we are confronted with the questions about how best to respond to the family and friends of victims and the family and friends of the perpetrators of crimes. Both groups have overwhelming needs that are all too often ignored or misunderstood by members of the Church Community. Those, who do wish to reach out, often feel ill-equipped to say or do the right thing in the face of such heartbreaking tragedy. We need to provide opportunities for members of our Church Community to learn how to respond and to stand with them in their struggle to overcome their anger, sense of loss, and overwhelming pain. It is vital to their personal recovery and their sense of acceptance and well-being.

Despite the long standing opposition of the U.S. Bishops to the death penalty and, more recently, the unequivocal and emphatic rejection of the death penalty as **"cruel and unnecessary"** by our Holy Father John Paul II, (4) we are well aware that many Catholics, approximately 70%, continue to support the death penalty. As servants of our local Archbishop Thomas C. Kelly we join with him in committing to **"a persistent and principled witness against the death penalty, against a culture of death, and for the Gospel of Life"** .(5)

We call upon all people of faith and good will to join us in this life-supporting mission.

REFERENCES:

1. [Confronting a Culture of Violence, U.S. Catholic Bishops, 1994.](#)
2. [Choose Life: Reflections on the Death Penalty](#), December 1996, p.10.
3. United States Catholic Conference, Washington, DC, 1975.
4. Christmas homily, December 1998. The Holy Father's visit to St. Louis, MO, January 1999.
5. [U.S. Bishops Good Friday Appeal to End the Death Penalty, April 2, 1999.](#)

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