



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

A Letter to Catholics in Wisconsin on the Death Penalty

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. We are writing to ask that you affirm Wisconsin's 153-year commitment to human life by voting "NO" on the upcoming advisory referendum to restore the death penalty.
2. We oppose the death penalty because we value human life, even when that life might seem unworthy to us. For Catholics, being "pro-life" means protecting life at all stages, from conception to natural death. A selective approach that values human life only in certain circumstances is inconsistent with who we are as a people of faith.
3. It is true that in the past the Church accepted the death penalty. But such use of lethal force by the state was strictly conditioned and limited. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* now states that if "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." (# 2267) That was the point Pope John Paul II made in his 1995 letter, *The Gospel of Life* (# 56). "Today," the Pope concluded, "as a result of steady improvements in the organization of the penal system, such cases are very rare, if not practically non-existent."
4. Significantly, the Wisconsin legislature made a similar judgment in 1853, when it abolished the death penalty after the construction of our first state prison. Our state has not executed anyone in 155 years, the longest any state has gone without doing so. During this time, Wisconsin's crime rate has consistently remained below the national average and far below many of the states that execute people most frequently. Also, Wisconsin has strengthened its sentencing practices in recent years. Increasingly, for first-degree intentional homicide, life means life.
5. While the presence of DNA evidence can help guard against the wrongful conviction of innocent individuals, it has no bearing on a defendant's moral culpability. Moreover, even with DNA evidence, the serious problem of unequal treatment under the law remains. Even in states with tight restrictions on the death penalty's use, a disproportionate number of people executed are poor and/or members of racial and ethnic minorities.

6. Any opposition to the death penalty is incomplete without a commitment to remember the victims. No one can observe the death of innocent people and the suffering of those who mourn them and not be moved to outrage. However, killing the criminal neither restores life to the dead nor heals the living. We honor the dead more eloquently by rejecting the barbarism that caused their deaths. We honor those who have suffered loss through violence and violation by ministering to those who mourn. We applaud those Catholics and others who help survivors grieve, heal and renew their lives.

7. Instead of extending the "culture of death" further across our society, we urge our fellow citizens to heed the words of Jesus, who ordered his follower to return his sword to its sheath (Jn. 18:12). Please join us in voting for life by opposing the advisory referendum on November 7th.

+ *Timothy M. Dolan*

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Archbishop of Milwaukee

+ *Robert C. Morlino*

The Most Rev. Robert C. Morlino
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+ *David A. Zubik*

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