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Virginia Catholic Bishops Issue Statement Calling for “Deeper Reexamination” of Death Penalty

As the Virginia General Assembly prepares to consider the Governor’s vetoes of five bills that would expand the state’s death-penalty statute, the leaders of Virginia’s two Catholic dioceses have issued a formal statement calling on “citizens of our Commonwealth, and especially our legislators,” to undertake “a deeper reexamination of our state’s use of this ultimate and irreversible sentence.” Calling Virginia’s death penalty “a system of punishment that has spiraled wildly out of control,” Bishops Paul Loverde (Diocese of Arlington) and Francis DiLorenzo (Diocese of Richmond) urged General Assembly members to sustain the Governor’s vetoes. “Given Virginia’s unusually frequent recourse to the death penalty,” they noted, “the last thing needed is to look for even more ways to apply it.”

The full text of the bishops’ statement appears below.

Life and Death in our Commonwealth

By Bishops Francis X. DiLorenzo and Paul S. Loverde

As the leaders of Virginia’s two Catholic dioceses, we recently opposed five bills in the General Assembly aimed at widening the list of crimes for which death sentences could be rendered. Although the bills passed with very little debate about their moral implications, Gov. Timothy M. Kaine’s decision to veto them gives our Commonwealth a much-needed second chance to reflect on a system of punishment that has spiraled wildly out of control.

Celebration of our Commonwealth’s 400th anniversary and storied contributions to the life of our nation must come with the recognition that since Jamestown, our history has been marred by nearly 1,300 executions, more than any other state; that since 1976,

we have executed more individuals (98) – nearly one in ten of the just over 1,000 total nationwide – than any state except Texas; that between 1908 and 1962, Virginia’s electric chair ended the lives of 236 people, 201 of whom were African-American males; and that in more recent decades, the disabled are among those who have been executed.

Even as states across our nation exhibit growing unease, restraint and moratoria on use of capital punishment (ten of the thirty-eight states in which it is lawful have suspended it), Virginians and their elected officials continue to apply the accelerator to a system of punishment that kills to teach that killing is wrong.

Our Commonwealth’s legacy, approach, and trajectory in the matter of capital punishment should give Virginians pause. That it has given Gov. Kaine sufficient cause to exercise his veto power is commendable; may citizens of our Commonwealth, and especially our legislators, join him in a deeper reexamination of our state’s use of this ultimate and irreversible sentence.

Our perspective on this matter is enhanced by our personal experiences. Together with faithful prison ministry volunteers at many of our Commonwealth’s 180 corrections facilities, we visit and pray with the incarcerated; so too, we have met the victims’ families and witnessed first-hand their deep-seated grief and anger at the loss of loved ones. We pray with victims for a healing that no further loss of life can bring, even as we pray that justice be served to those who commit crimes.

A just punishment must be consistent with both the demands of justice and with respect for human life and dignity. Although often difficult or painful to acknowledge, respect for life applies to all, even the perpetrators of the most terrible acts imaginable. Later this week, on Good Friday, we will call to mind the mercy shown by Jesus Christ in his words to the thief on the cross: “Today you will be with me in paradise.” Each of us is called to likewise respect the life and dignity of every human being. Even when the criminal, the thief, denies the dignity of others, we must still recognize that his dignity is, quite literally, a given: a gift from God neither earned nor lost through behavior.

Our consciences, therefore, call us to defend human life and dignity from conception to natural death with maximum determination. In fact, whenever an execution is scheduled in Virginia, we have called for a commutation of the death sentence to life without the possibility of parole. Because bloodless means of punishment are more in keeping with the offender’s human dignity, society must, we believe, limit itself to those means whenever possible. Our Catholic tradition teaches that the death penalty should only be used when, in the words of Pope John Paul II, “it would not be possible otherwise to defend society.” In similar words, we recently joined with our fellow U.S. bishops in *A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death*: “No matter how heinous the crime, if society can protect itself without ending a human life, it should do so.”

Applying these principles to the Commonwealth of today, we are convinced that our government, equipped with an effective system of incarceration and the availability

of a life-without-parole sentence, has no business imposing or carrying out death sentences. We therefore call on Virginia's General Assembly members to sustain the Governor's vetoes.

Even those who do not share our firm conviction – that the death penalty cannot be justified when non-lethal means are sufficient to protect society – should be able to agree on this much: Given Virginia's unusually frequent recourse to the death penalty, the last thing needed is to look for even more ways to apply it.

Citizens of our Commonwealth stand at a crossroads: The vital choice before us – raised by the General Assembly's approval of death-penalty expansions and Governor Kaine's subsequent rejection of them – is whether Virginia's death penalty should be curbed or expanded. As we weigh the decision at hand, may we be mindful of how the price of capital punishment extends – far beyond those executed – to the very society which condones the taking of life.

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