

Media release

Bishops Conference supports efforts to abolish the death penalty worldwide

Opening statement given by ACBC Public Policy Director, Jeremy Stuparich, to a public hearing of the Australian Parliament's Human Rights Subcommittee inquiry on Australian advocacy for abolition of the death penalty

27 November 2015

I appreciate the invitation from the Committee to speak with you today about efforts to end the death penalty internationally.

Australia's Catholic bishops oppose the death penalty and want to see it abolished everywhere.

The bishops welcome the Committee's inquiry in this area because they want to understand how they can more effectively contribute to the goal of ending capital punishment worldwide.

The death penalty can in Australia be seen as an issue remote from our lives, but earlier this year, the bishops were active not only in lobbying for clemency for Andrew Chan and Myuran Sukumaran but also importantly in prayer vigils on their behalf. The executions of these two young men reminded Australians of the pain and sadness that accompanies all judicial killings around the globe.

I'd like to take a few minutes if I may, to outline:

- The development of the Church's opposition to the death penalty
- The reasons why the Church opposes the death penalty
- The role of the Holy See, and
- Where there might be some opportunities for work by Australian bishops to assist a broader strategy

Development of the Church's opposition to the death penalty

The Catholic Church's opposition to capital punishment has undergone incremental but rapid development, mostly over the last 50 years. But initially the Church's opposition included an exception "in cases of extreme gravity".

In 1995, Pope John Paul II wrote that this exception, seen as necessary to defend society, could only be rare – so rare a case it might not ever arise - because improvements in the prison system meant society could only rarely if ever be at risk from a person convicted of a grave offence. Pope John Paul II argued Catholics should be "unconditionally pro-life", which included opposition to the death penalty.

The current pope, Pope Francis, has gone one step further in developing Church teaching, with the Church's strongest ever rejection of the death penalty. Pope Francis concludes there is no situation – not even a rare one - where capital punishment is justified for public safety. Pope Francis argues that people who are in prison are not able to harm others in the broader community and so cannot be a threat to society.

Most recently, of course, the Pope reminded the United States Congress in September of the solemn obligation we have to protect human life at every stage of its development, from conception to natural death. He said this conviction led him to call for the end of the death penalty.

The reasons why the Church opposes the death penalty

There are a number of reasons the Catholic Church opposes the death penalty, but principle among them is the idea of human dignity. Human dignity is a fundamental tenet of Catholic social teaching.

Each and every human being has human dignity because we are all created in God's image. We all have human dignity regardless of age, sex, race, our abilities, or any other quality. Since human life is continuous from conception to natural death, the inherent dignity and right to life of every person must be respected.

The Church also opposes capital punishment because:

- It is cruel and deprives the convicted person of God's mercy

- It robs the convicted person of future opportunities to repent and to find peace with God and others
- It is not a useful deterrent
- there is ample evidence courts can make mistakes, and
- those who administer or support the system of executions are diminished by killing someone, supposedly in the name of justice.

The role of the Holy See

I note the Committee has received a submission from the Holy See.

The Holy See is the seat or 'See' of the Bishop of Rome and is recognized in international law as being similar to a sovereign state. The Bishop of Rome is otherwise known as the Pope.

The Holy See is a separate entity from the Vatican City State, which only came into being in 1929. It has the world's oldest diplomatic service and has a distinguished history working against capital punishment.

The Holy See reiterated opposition to the death penalty in March this year, when its representative supported a UN resolution in the Human Rights Council, calling for the abolition of the death penalty.

Opportunities for work by Australian bishops to assist a broader strategy

Australia's bishops naturally look to the Holy See to play an international role as it represents the whole church.

But there are some opportunities for the Australian bishops to work with brother bishops and other contacts through the global network that is the Church to assist a broader strategy. I would suggest that perhaps the best opportunities for the bishops to assist are working through their personal contacts in other bishops conferences in other countries.

Australia's Catholic bishops support ending the death penalty internationally. The bishops would be happy to consider ways to work with the Australian Government's efforts, where appropriate, to reach this important goal.