



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

1 October 2015

Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs,
Defence and Trade
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Dear Committee Secretary

Australia's Advocacy for the Abolition of the Death Penalty

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) is a permanent institution of the Catholic Church in Australia and the instrumentality through which the Australian Catholic Bishops act nationally and address issues of national significance.

The Catholic Church contributes in a wide variety of ways across the spectrum of Australian society. As an integral part of its core mission, the Church seeks to assist people experience the fullness of life. It is concerned with all that impacts on human wellbeing. It comprises many thousands of different entities which have different purposes and modes of governance.

The ACBC appreciates the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry regarding Australia's Advocacy for the Abolition of the Death Penalty.

The Catholic Church has long expressed concern about the death penalty.

Just last week Pope Francis, addressing the United States Congress, said:

“The Golden Rule¹ also reminds us of our responsibility to protect and defend human life at every stage of its development. This conviction has led me, from the beginning of my ministry, to advocate at different levels for the global abolition of the death penalty. I am convinced that this way is the best, since every life is sacred, every human person is endowed with an inalienable dignity, and society can only benefit from the rehabilitation of those convicted of crimes. Recently my brother bishops here in the United States renewed their call for the abolition of the death penalty.

¹ “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (Mt 7:12).

Not only do I support them, but I also offer encouragement to all those who are convinced that a just and necessary punishment must never exclude the dimension of hope and the goal of rehabilitation.”²

Pope Francis’ comments build on a long tradition of concern by the Catholic Church over the death penalty.³

The death penalty has been made real to many Australians by the execution of Australians Andrew Chan and Myuran Sukumaran earlier this year.

In January I wrote to His Excellency Joko Widodo, President of the Republic of Indonesia, to seek the President’s mercy for Mr Chan and Mr Sukumaran, who were both on death row in Kerobokan prison. I was distressed to then be praying for their souls and for their family members when these two men were executed in April.

When it comes to crime and punishment, we must recognise and honour the human dignity of both victims and offenders.

Human dignity is the dignity unique to human beings and the basis of all human rights. Human dignity is possessed by each and every human being, irrespective of their age, sex, race, abilities, or any other quality. The inherent dignity and right to life of every person must be respected from the moment of conception until natural death.⁴

The drug crimes Andrew Chan and Myuran Sukumaran were convicted of are abhorrent. Justice must prevail and appropriate punishment be used for the common good of the community when crimes are committed. But jail sentences, not execution, are the more appropriate means for punishing offenders and deterring those who would consider committing such crimes.

The imposition of the death penalty is cruel and unnecessary for what it does to those found guilty, to their families and to our society. Communities are much richer when they can demonstrate mercy. Restorative justice, for example, is one approach that can help turn around peoples’ lives, help them take responsibility for their actions and bring healing to both the victim and the perpetrator.

Prison chaplains also have a vital role journeying with prisoners to help them turn their lives around. Chaplains are within the prison, but not of it. They are a sign of mercy and that society has not given up on the prisoner. They bring hope and can be a window for the wider community into the experience of the jailed person.

² Visit to the Joint Session of the United States Congress: [Address of the Holy Father](#). United States Capitol, Washington, D.C. Thursday, 24 September 2015

³ [Address of Pope Francis to the Delegates of the International Association of Penal Law](#). Hall of Popes, Thursday, 23 October 2014.

John Paul II, [Evangelium Vitae](#): To the Bishops Priests and Deacons Men and Women religious lay Faithful and all People of Good Will on the Value and Inviolability of Human Life, 27 March 1995. #56.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 2267.

⁴ Instruction Dignitas Personae on Certain Bioethical Questions, 20 June 2008, #4, 6.

As a community, Australians and our international friends must have a commitment to respect and protect the dignity of every human life, even those people who do great harm. We can recognise the seriousness of the offences committed but still oppose the death penalty. Our concern for the worth of human life motivates our opposition to the death penalty.

I note that the terms of reference for the inquiry include considering whether Australia's efforts to advocate for worldwide abolition of the death penalty could be improved by:

- “engaging with international institutions and likeminded countries” and
- “cooperating with non-government organisations”.

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference would be happy to assist the Australian Government where it can to make contact with appropriate Holy See diplomats. It would also be pleased to assist where possible with making representations to other national governments with the assistance of the respective National Catholic Bishops Conferences.

I would be happy to answer any questions the Committee may have.

Yours faithfully

ARCHBISHOP OF MELBOURNE
President
Australian Catholic Bishops Conference