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Bishops call death penalty moratorium a positive step

The Catholic bishops of Washington State applauded Gov. Jay Inslee's decision to impose a moratorium on executions during his term of office and added their support for a broad public conversation on capital punishment.

In a letter thanking the governor for his decision, the bishops repeated their support for abolishing the death penalty and pledged their assistance to the governor in raising awareness about the moral and practical reasons for ending executions here.

In his announcement, Inslee said that use of capital punishment is inconsistent and unequal. He called for "a conversation about ensuring equal justice under the law."

In their letter, the state's Catholic bishops referred to past statements of the Washington State Catholic Conference that called into question justification for the use of capital punishment and outlined the bishops' reasons for opposing executions by the state.

"The people of Washington are confronted with unanswered questions regarding capital punishment," Washington's bishops wrote in their 2009 statement on the death penalty. "Is it fairly applied? Are innocent people executed? Are our motives revenge or safety? Is the punishment of death a cost effective means of ensuring public safety?"

The governor has "taken a positive step by halting executions in Washington state" while he is the state's chief executive, the bishops said in their letter. "We hope this will lead to a fruitful discussion about the dignity of human life, help us find answers to the compelling questions surrounding the death penalty and eventually lead to abolishing the practice of executions in Washington State."

Gov. Inslee said he will issue a reprieve for death penalty cases that come to his desk, but that the moratorium does not commute the sentences of death row inmates or grant them pardons.

Insisting that the state must hold individuals accountable for their crimes, the bishops also noted that the "real tragedy of criminal murders, however, is that there is no way to rebalance the scales of justice... and that taking a human life in the name of retribution does not breed justice or bring closure, but only continues the cycle of violence and hatred."

The bishops pledged to work with the governor and other leaders to "seek the most effective means to achieve justice, while at the same time turning away from violence as a solution to social problems."

The Catholic Bishops of Washington State are: Archbishop J. Peter Sartain of the Archdiocese of Seattle; Bishop Blase J. Cupich of the Diocese of Spokane; Bishop Joseph J. Tyson of the Diocese of Yakima; and Bishop Eusebio Elizondo, Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Seattle.

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