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## Statement from the Roman Catholic Bishops of South Dakota Regarding Impending Executions and the Death Penalty

October 9, 2012

*Memorial Feast of Saint Denis and his companions*

Dear Friends in Christ,

In the coming weeks the State of South Dakota will likely execute three persons. Several others are awaiting execution. It is a time for us to prayerfully reflect on the role of the state as an agent of death.

### IMPACT OF CRIMES COMMITTED AGAINST OTHERS

It is impossible for most of us to fully relate to the depth of horror that the brutal murder of a loved one brings upon family and friends. Nor can we underestimate the anger it naturally raises not only among those most affected but by all of us who expect our communities and our families to be safe. This understandable reaction is intensified when, as we have seen, convicted murderers mock the mourners or minimize the significance of their sentence by declaring that they wish to die at the hands of the state.

Our fervent prayers and heartfelt support are with those who grieve the agonizing injustice done to them and those they love, and who must cope with the painful results of evil acts thrust upon them. We pray for the consolation that comes from knowing that those who suffered are beloved children of God and that they are in His loving care. We pray also for the grace of healing and forgiveness for those who miss them.

We also pray for those who have committed these heinous crimes. May their hearts be converted by the recognition of the pain they have inflicted and may they in humility seek God's mercy.

### THE STATE'S ROLE

Clearly, the state has an obligation to hold violent criminals accountable for their actions and to protect society from those who are a threat. Heavy is the duty on the legislative, judicial and executive public officials as they seek to exercise their responsibilities in good conscience and according to civil and moral law.

The task of those who work in prisons and in jails is especially heavy. They deserve our sincere appreciation for their difficult and dangerous public service. We pray for them as well and for their families who worry about them every day.

Yet, we as persons and as a State ought not to shrink to the level of the violent criminals by sanctioning state-inflicted violence. We are all gifted by God with life and reason and, therefore, are called to a higher standard.

Violence in response to violence does not relieve personal anguish or result in societal protection. State-sanctioned violence does not heal or redress wounds. Only forgiveness can do so. As hard as that is, with God's grace, it is possible. Forgiveness does not justify or condone wrongful acts, nor does it disrespect or minimize the sacrifice of those who have suffered. It can however relieve the burden of the past that weighs down survivors and can contribute to the conversion and true repentance of the criminal.

State executions only add to the cycle of violence that plagues our country in so many ways. When they are authorized, respect for human life is eroded.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us that "If nonlethal 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) In addition, it notes that executions terminate the possibility for conversion and reconciliation which is possible for us all whatever our sin or crime. We recall the words of Blessed Pope John Paul II that recourse to the death penalty should be "very rare, if not practically non-existent" (*Evangelium vitae*, 56).

That is true in our state. Nonlethal means to defend and protect are sufficient in South Dakota. This is insured by the professionalism of our public safety employees and has been enhanced by advanced technology, intensive training, and strengthened policies and procedures in our state penal system. All these improvements remove threats from aggressors to society and protect those who work and live in the prisons.

As a result of the incident in which a prison employee's life was senselessly and needlessly taken, state government has already responded in ways that better assure that this will not happen again. The safety record achieved over many years at great personal risk and sacrifice by so many who work in or oversee our prisons is impressive and reassuring. We are confident that the State will continue to take whatever measures are necessary to further assure the safety of all those in the prison and jail system, both the personnel and the prisoners.

## APPROPRIATE RESPONSE

We as citizens and as spiritual leaders affirm that those who commit horrific crimes must be held accountable for their actions and that justice is both swift and certain. We must also assure the safety of individuals and of society in all its facets. These goals can be achieved without state-sanctioned violence and in ways that uphold the sanctity of life and assert that God, the giver of life, is its true steward. The records of other States without the death penalty offer us assurance and examples of how this can be accomplished.

We urge, then, that the scheduled executions be stayed, that the convicted criminals be sentenced to life imprisonment with whatever special constraints are deemed necessary, and that our prison and jail system be provided adequate resources to accomplish their vital task.


We also urge repeal of the death penalty itself because it serves no necessary purpose in our state and undermines the moral authority of our government. This would also lend assurance that innocent persons wrongly convicted, as has happened in some states, may be exonerated.

We call for a system of justice and reconciliation that is worthy of the values of the people of South Dakota. These include both being realistic about the dangers that exist and confident about the ability to protect life in all its phases.

We offer this statement knowing that whatever we do or fail to do, each of us, saint and sinner, will ultimately be subject to God who is the final judge and who will dispense justice with mercy.



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