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S.B. 280 An Act Revising the Penalty for Capital Felonies

Wednesday March 14, 2012

Testimony of the Roman Catholic Bishops of Connecticut
By The Most Rev. Peter A. Rosazza, Retired Auxiliary Bishop of Hartford

I thank the co-chairmen of the Judiciary Committee for this opportunity to testify on behalf of Connecticut's seven Roman Catholic Bishops in favor of repealing the death penalty in our state.

The legal arguments in favor of abolition include the exoneration of prisoners on death row due to DNA evidence. In a recent case, a conviction was overturned when it was shown that an eye-witness pointed out the wrong man. Moreover, it is becoming clearer that an infallible system cannot produce certitude in all cases that involve the possible execution of a human being by the state.

These arguments are supported in the moral domain by the teaching of the popes and the bishops. Following the lead of Pope John Paul II, the Catholic Bishops of our state – and our country – have joined with other individuals and groups to end the death penalty.

The pope's vision was based on a consistent ethic of life. This means that human life is sacred and deserves the utmost respect from conception until natural death. People do not lose that sacredness even though they have taken the life of another.

In this regard, Pope John Paul said, in St. Louis, MO, on January 27th, 1999: "A sign of hope is the increasing recognition that the dignity of human life must never be taken away, even in the case of someone who has done great evil. Modern society has the means of protecting itself, without definitively denying criminals the chance to reform. I renew my appeal for a consensus to end the death penalty, which is both cruel and unnecessary."

It was because he was so moved by the pope's plea for mercy that Governor Mel Carnahan commuted Darryl Mease's death sentence to *life in prison* in 1999.

In his encyclical "The Gospel of Life," Pope John Paul II says that society has the right to protect itself from harm and can do so by incarcerating someone convicted of a capital offense. The chances in and advanced society like ours of such a felon escaping are practically

impossible. (My brother, Tom, who has spent 46 years as a correctional justice consultant, corroborates this.)

An important point overlooked by those who want to keep the death penalty is that it doesn't give the convicted murderer time to repent and to beg forgiveness of grieving family members.

Continuing in the direction set by his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI in November of last year received groups that have worked to end the death penalty throughout the world. Among them was a delegation from the State of Illinois that became the 16th state to do so under Governor Pat Quinn. At that time the pope praised the work of the delegations and hoped that they would "encourage political and legislative initiatives being promoted in a number of countries to eliminate the death penalty and promote progress in penal law that speaks equally to the human dignity of prisoners and the effective maintenance of public order."

Following the popes' leads, the Catholic bishops of our country stated that, "The death penalty diminishes all of us. Its use ought to be abandoned, not only for what it does to those who are executed, but what it does to us as a society. We cannot teach respect for life by taking life."

Finally, Connecticut was the last state in New England to abolish slavery. Hopefully, we shall not have this shameful distinction as regards the death penalty.