

Letter in Support of Proposition 34, Replacing the Death Penalty in California with Life in Prison

October 15, 2012

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Together with my fellow Bishops of California, Pope Benedict XVI, Blessed Pope John Paul II and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, I write to you today in strong support of Proposition 34 to replace the death penalty in California with a sentence of life in prison with no possibility of parole.

As Catholics, this November we have a historic chance to vote "YES on 34" and so better promote the Church's cherished tradition of restorative justice.

In 2005, the U.S. Bishops laid out a number of reasons for opposing the use of the death penalty, among them the irreversible mistake of executing an innocent person. The Bishops went on to find that the system was easily flawed, prone to error and biased.

We know that hundreds of innocent people have been wrongfully convicted of serious crimes in California. Nationwide, 140 death row inmates have been exonerated of their capital crimes. It is hard enough to restore justice to such people while they are still alive, it is quite impossible after they have been put to death.

While serious crimes do need to be addressed with serious sentences, life without the possibility of parole is a severe sentence that meets our goal of public safety while better respecting the sanctity of human life.

To date, over 400 Murder Victims' Family Members are supporting Proposition 34. Vicki Schieber, one of the signers, who lost her daughter Shannon to violence, advocates for an end to the death penalty within our pro-life network.

Fellow Catholic, Bud Welch, whose daughter, Julie, was killed in the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, puts it this way, "My conviction is simple: more violence...will not bring Julie back. More violence only makes our society more violent." As Catholics, we believe "as a gift from God, every human life is sacred from conception to natural death."

In "Evangelium Vitae" ("The Gospel of Life"), Blessed Pope John Paul II explains the tendency both in the Church and in civil society to "view the death penalty in the context of a system of penal justice ever more in line with human dignity and thus, in the end, with God's plan for man and society."

The principle set forth in the Catechism of the Catholic Church remains valid:

"If bloodless means are sufficient to defend human lives against an aggressor and to protect public order and the safety of persons, public authority must limit itself to such means, because they better correspond to the concrete conditions of the common good and are more in conformity to the dignity of the human person."

Today, given the steady improvements in maximum security prisons, we can defend the public order, ensure people's safety, and demand accountability for victims by requiring work and restitution to victims, without going to the extreme of executing an offender.

Perhaps most simply and importantly, in the words of the United States Bishops: "Ending the death penalty would be one important step away from a culture of death and toward building a culture of life." (USCCB 2005)

For additional information on the death penalty and Proposition 34, please visit our [Archdiocesan Public Policy webpage on the death penalty](#).

For Bishops' statements and the Catholic perspective on the death penalty in California please visit the [California Catholic Conference](#) website.

For nationwide resources on the death penalty visit the [Catholic Mobilizing Network](#) website.

Sincerely yours in Christ,
The Most Reverend Salvatore J. Cordileone
Archbishop of San Francisco
October 15, 2012