

Post-Permanent Council Meeting
CBCP Pastoral Statement on Death Penalty

“God proved his love for us that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Rom 5:8)
On this third Sunday of Lent, the Gospel of John tells us how the Samaritan woman—having found in Jesus the “living water” she had longed for—left her jar of water by the well (John 4:28). Like this woman, the stubborn Israelites in the first reading, who are dying of thirst in the desert, have been led to a rock (Exod 17:6). Perhaps we can think of this rock as Christ himself, stricken and afflicted on the cross but gushing forth with life-giving water, making it possible for God’s people to cross over the barren desert of hatred, sin and death into the promised land of fullness of life. Dear sisters and brothers in Christ—let us not allow our wells to be poisoned by bitter water; let us uphold the sanctity of life and make a stand against death penalty.

We are not deaf to the cries of the victims of heinous crimes. The victims and their victimizers are both our brothers and sisters. The victim and the oppressor are both children of God. To the guilty we offer a challenge to repent and repair the harm of their sins. To the grieving victims, we offer our love, our compassion, our hope.

On the day the death penalty law was repealed by the Philippine Congress on June 24, 2006, the lights were turned on in the colosseum in Rome. History tells us how many people—among them, countless Christian martyrs—were publicly executed in that infamous arena. Perhaps to erase the darkness of inhumanity that the said colosseum has been associated with, the citizens of Rome have since made it a point to have it illuminated, each time another country decides to repeal its capital punishment law. Each illumination has been made to symbolize another advancement in human civilization. Are we to reverse that advancement by restoring death penalty again in the Philippines?

It was Ash Wednesday when members of the lower house, on the second reading of the death penalty bill, outvoted by voice-voting the nays with their ayes. Ironically, they were captured on television shouting in favor of death with their foreheads marked with crosses made of ashes. Could they have forgotten what that cross meant? Could they have missed out the contradiction between their vote and the crosses on their foreheads, which were supposed to serve as a loud statement of faith in the God who, for love of us, chose to give up his life for our salvation, rather than see us perish (John 3:16)?

No doubt, death penalty has been in existence in many countries all over the world. It is often justified by a principle of justice based on retribution—“an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” (Matthew 5:3), which Jesus challenged and replaced with the higher principle of non-retaliation of evil for evil, with justice founded on mercy (Luke 6:36). We know from history how capital punishment has so often been used by repressive governments as a way of stifling dissent, or of eliminating those whom they regarded as threats to their hold on political power. Think, for instance

why Herod Antipas had John the Baptist beheaded, or why Pilate had Jesus crucified. Think of the thousands of Christian martyrs who were put to death for sheer hatred for the faith.

To the people who use the Bible to defend death penalty, need we point out how many other crimes against humanity have been justified, using the same Bible? We humbly enjoin them to interpret the Scriptures properly, to read them as a progressive revelation of God's will to humankind, with its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ, God's definitive Word to the world. He came "not to abolish the law but to bring it to fulfillment" (Matthew 5:17). Jesus was never an advocate of any form of "legal killing". He defended the adulterous woman against those who demanded her blood and challenged those who were without sin among them to be the first to cast a stone on her (John 8:7).

Even with the best of intentions, capital punishment has never been proven effective as a deterrent to crime. Obviously it is easier to eliminate criminals than to get rid of the root causes of criminality in society. Capital punishment and a flawed legal system are always a lethal mix. And since in any human society there is never a guarantee of a flawless legal system, there is always the great likelihood that those without capital will get the punishment more quickly because it is they who cannot afford a good lawyer and a guarantee of due process. As a law, death penalty directly contradicts the principle of inalienability of the basic human right to life, which is enshrined in most constitutions of countries that signed the universal declaration of human rights.

Let us pray fervently for the legislators of our country as they prepare to vote on death penalty in the Philippine Senate. Let us offer all our Masses for them, asking our Crucified Lord who offered his whole life, body and blood, for the salvation of sinners, to touch their consciences and lead them to abolish capital punishment once and for all.

From the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, 19 March 2017

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