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The Catholic bishops of Washington state Oct. 11 applauded the unanimous decision of the state Supreme Court striking down the death penalty as unconstitutional.

The court ruled its use is arbitrary and racially biased and converted the sentences for the state's eight death-row inmates to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

Executions have been rare in Washington. Five prisoners have been put to death in recent decades. In 2014, the governor imposed a moratorium blocking its use.

"The bishops have long been on record as opposing capital punishment," said a statement issued by the Washington State Catholic Conference, the public policy arm of the bishops. "Today's decision by the Supreme Court indicates a move toward greater justice and greater respect for life at all stages.

"The Catholic Church's consistent belief is that every human life is sacred from conception until natural death -- it is this principle that has energized our efforts for decades to abolish the death penalty," said Archbishop Peter Sartain of Seattle.

In an Oct. 16 statement, the chairman of the U.S. bishops' domestic policy committee echoed the Washington state bishops in applauding the court's unanimous ruling. He also reiterated the Catholic Church's call to end the death penalty.

"In the court's opinion, the death penalty was deemed 'invalid because it is imposed in an arbitrary and racially biased manner,'" said Bishop Frank Dewane of Venice, Florida, chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development. "This echoes one of the reasons to oppose the death penalty that the bishops gave in their 2005 statement 'A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death.'"

He noted that Pope Francis in his 2015 address to the joint meeting on Congress in Washington "called for the global abolition of the death penalty" and he quoted from the pope's words: "I am convinced that this way is the best, since every life is sacred, every human person is endowed with an inalienable dignity, and society can only benefit from the rehabilitation of those convicted of crimes. … (A) just and necessary punishment must never exclude the dimension of hope and the goal of rehabilitation."

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Earlier this year, Washington's Catholic bishops provided testimony in support of legislation to repeal the death penalty citing the country's imperfect record in imposing the death penalty, the potential for racial biases and specific instances where innocent people have been executed for crimes they did not commit.

Since 1973, 161 people sentenced to death have been exonerated in the U.S.

In addition to Sartain, Washington's bishops are: Bishop Thomas Daly of Spokane; Bishop Joseph Tyson of Yakima; and Auxiliary Bishops Eusebio Elizondo and Daniel Mueggenborg of Seattle.

"This decision will save Washington state taxpayers millions of dollars that would otherwise be wasted," said an official of Conservatives Concerned About the Death Penalty.

Hannah Cox, the organization's national manager, added: "Conservatives in Washington state and across the country increasingly realize the death penalty is a failed government program that does not value life, threatens innocent people, and wastes money."

The Association of U.S. Catholic Priests said Oct. 16: "In our ministry as Catholic priests in parishes and prisons, we have long shared the concern of the governor (of Washington) and the decision of the justices that the death penalty was racially biased and meted out haphazardly. Our association stands with our bishops in calling for abolition of the death penalty nationwide."

Association members said they were praying the remaining states in the country "where the death penalty is still imposed will find truth in the decisions of the Washington state justices."

They also offered prayers "for those in prison, that they may repent of the actions that put them on death row and commit themselves to using their lives to grow into ever better persons. May the transformation they will pursue help bring peace to their victims and families and enable them to extend Christ-like forgiveness."