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Washington state's bishops back governor's moratorium on death penalty

by Catholic News Service

Seattle — Washington state's Catholic bishops praised Gov. Jay Inslee for declaring a moratorium on the use of the death penalty in the state and applauded him for urging there be "a public conversation on capital punishment."

As pastoral leaders of the state's more than 1 million Catholics, "we favor abolishing the death penalty, but also recognize the obstacles to achieving that goal," the bishops wrote in a letter to the governor Thursday. "We therefore pledge our assistance by working to raise awareness among Catholic people and all people of good will about the moral and practical reasons for ending executions in our state."

The letter was released by the Washington State Catholic Conference, the bishops' public policy arm. In it, they pointed Inslee to previous statements issued by the conference about the death penalty.

The most recent statement, released in 2009, "called into question the justification for the use of capital punishment."

"At that time we wrote: 'The people of Washington are confronted with unanswered questions regarding capital punishment. Is it fairly applied? Are innocent people executed? Are our motives revenge or safety? Is the punishment of death a cost-effective means of ensuring public safety?' "

The bishops told Inslee he took a positive step Tuesday when he temporarily halted executions in Washington. "We hope this will lead to a fruitful discussion about the dignity of human life, help us find answers to the compelling questions surrounding the death penalty and eventually lead to permanently abolishing the practice of executions" in the state.

They said that like the governor, "we also recognize that criminals must be answerable for their crimes."

"The state must hold murderers accountable for taking an innocent human life, but also for the great suffering and pain they have inflicted on the victims' family and friends that will last a lifetime," the bishops wrote. "The real tragedy of criminal murders, however, is that there is no way to rebalance the scales of justice, no way to bring life back to those who have been murdered or to restore them to their grieving families."

When the death penalty is imposed, the state "proclaims that taking one human life counterbalances the taking of another life. This assumption is profoundly mistaken," they said.

They said people must understand "that taking a human life in the name of retribution does not breed justice or bring closure, but only continues the cycle of violence and hatred. Nothing can restore a human life."

Inslee as chief executive of the state, the bishops as pastors and various institutions of civil society must work together to "seek the most effective means to achieve justice" and turn away "from violence as a solution to social problems," the letter said.

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The bishops pledged their prayers and support to Inslee's efforts to help "the people of our state to resolve this issue in a manner that reflects God's law of justice and mercy."

The letter was signed by Archbishop J. Peter Sartain of Seattle; Bishop Blase Cupich of Spokane; Bishop Joseph Tyson of Yakima; and Auxiliary Bishop Eusebio Elizondo of Seattle.

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