

**Statement of Most Reverend John M. Smith
Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Trenton
To the New Jersey Senate Judiciary Committee**

May 10, 2007

Two days ago, on Tuesday, May 8, 2007 the New Jersey Board of Catholic Bishops met at Sacred Heart Basilica – Cathedral in Newark. During our meeting the Bishops once again reaffirmed our united opposition to the Death Penalty. The Bishops have asked me to represent them today and on their behalf to speak in favor of S-171.

Today, I bring a simple message:

The death penalty is not consistent with evolving standards of decency.

Because the State of New Jersey has other means to redress the injustice caused by crime and to effectively prevent crime by rendering the one who has committed the offense incapable of doing harm and because we recognize the dignity of all human life, we continue to consistently and vigorously oppose the use of the death penalty.

The New Jersey Catholic Bishops spoke to this issue in their statement of February 4, 2005. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, on Holy Thursday of 2005, launched a campaign to end capital punishment in the United States, stating: “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.”

We are guided by our belief that every person has an inalienable right to life, because each human being is made in the image and likeness of God, who alone is the absolute Lord of life from its beginning until its end (cf. The Book of Genesis 1:26-28).

We acknowledge that the subject of capital punishment is controversial and emotional. All murders are violent and shocking; some are savage. They all stir emotions of revulsion and anger.

We grieve for the victims of murder, for the brutalization and loss of life.

We commiserate with the families and friends of victims who must suffer with their loss through the years.

We affirm that the state has the duty to punish criminals and to prevent the repetition or occurrence of crime.

We believe that greater efforts must be made to bring the criminal to repentance and rehabilitation.

And we believe that our society is sufficiently developed to protect itself and to redress the injustice caused by the criminal without resorting to the use of the death penalty. One alternative is life in prison without the possibility of parole.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* acknowledges the right of public authorities to impose criminal punishment proportionate to the gravity of the offense, “if this is the only possible way of effectively defending human lives against the unjust aggressor. If, however, non-lethal means are sufficient to defend and protect people’s safety from the aggressor, authority will limit itself to such means, as these are more in keeping with the concrete conditions of the common good and more in conformity with the dignity of the human person.”

Because the State of New Jersey has other means to redress the injustice caused by crime and to effectively prevent crime by rendering the one who has committed the offense incapable of doing harm and because we recognize the dignity of all human life, we continue to consistently and vigorously oppose the use of capital punishment.

Let me conclude by recognizing the need for improvement of our criminal justice system and for a greater societal commitment to crime prevention and victim assistance. As pastors and teachers we urge the State of New Jersey not to impose the death penalty in our state. Senators, the Catholic Bishops of New Jersey ask you to release favorably Senate Bill 171.

Most Rev. John J. Myers
Archbishop of Newark

Most Reverend Andrew Pataki
Bishop of the Byzantine Catholic Eparchy of Passaic

Most Reverend Joseph A. Galante
Bishop of Camden

Most Reverend Joseph Younan
Bishop of Our Lady of Deliverance Diocese

Most Reverend Paul G. Bootkoski
Bishop of Metuchen

Most Reverend Edgar M. da Cunha
Auxiliary Bishop of Newark

Most Reverend Arthur J. Serratelli
Bishop of Paterson

Most Reverend Thomas A. Donato
Auxiliary Bishop of Newark

Most Reverend John M. Smith
Bishop of Trenton

Most Reverend John W. Flesey
Auxiliary Bishop of Newark