

COUNCIL OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS OF METROPOLITAN CHICAGO

April 29, 2002

COUNCIL STATEMENT ON THE DEATH PENALTY

The carefully drawn report of the Governor's Commission on Capital Punishment returns the subject of the administration of the death penalty in Illinois to the center of public attention. The issue will not and should not go away.

The Council of Religious Leaders of Metropolitan Chicago, composed of leaders of the Chicago area's Episcopal, Roman Catholic, Eastern and Oriental Orthodox, Protestant, Jewish, and Islamic communions and institutions, has previously applauded Governor George Ryan for invoking a temporary suspension of the death penalty in Illinois and for appointing a Commission to study the penalty's administration in our state. We now commend the members of the Commission for the serious way in which they carried out their assignment. They have served well the people of this State.

The report makes it even clearer than it was before just how tragically flawed the administration of the death penalty has been in this State. The crime of capital punishment is a burden Illinois will carry for years to come.

The Commission recommends no fewer than 85 separate reforms that would be needed to permit the people of Illinois to inflict this supreme punishment on any individual with any sense of confidence that the cause of justice had been met. Critics have been quick to point out the cost and complexity of carrying out such reforms. They are right. It would be wrong, however, to conclude that the cost and complexity relieves us from the responsibility of doing so. Such a decision would be an act of public disgrace and shame.

Separately and together, the recommended reforms make an overwhelming case for a permanent moratorium on the use of the death penalty. Indeed, it may be argued that even if all 85 reforms were adopted and put in place, the fair and just administration of capital punishment would still elude us. No reforms imaginable can really address the fractures of race and class that will inevitably enter into deciding who shall live and who shall die at the hands of the state.

We now have both the civic opportunity and the moral obligation to avoid this. Just and reasonable alternatives to capital punishment are readily available and should be employed.

We join with the public at large in acknowledging that our diverse religious traditions and teachings are not of one mind as to whether capital punishment is, by its very nature, wrong and never justified – though for many of us, it will always remain so. Nevertheless, we are united in the conviction that there is now even more overwhelming and persuasive evidence that in practice the administration of the death penalty in our society is flawed and unjust – and most likely, irreparably so. Its use should be indefinitely suspended. We urge our civic and elected leaders to make this choice.

And knowing that our scriptures call us “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God,” we again challenge the members of our faith communities to study carefully the witness and teachings of their own traditions regarding this matter, many of which call for the elimination of capital punishment, and all of which challenge their adherents to join in seeking a society where justice is administered fairly and mercy prevails.

Bishop William Persell, President of the Council
Rev. Paul Rutgers, Executive Director

#####

For further information contact:

Rev. Paul Rutgers, Executive Director
1143 S. Plymouth Court, Suite 507
Chicago, IL 60605
office 312-431-3236 cellular 312-504-4228
Email: PHRutgers@aol.com