STATEMENT

Statements from the Vatican on the Death Penalty

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- End of Life Issues
- Death Penalty
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The Church's involvement in the issue of the death penalty has taken on a high profile with the Pope's visit to St. Louis

in January 1999.

Following are several quotes from the Pope. We hope you find these helpful as you continue your own work on the death penalty.

A. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Ecclesia in America of the Holy Father John Paul II - January 1999

"The culture of death and a society dominated by the powerful"

63. Nowadays, in America as elsewhere in the world, a model of society appears to be emerging in which the powerful predominate, setting aside and even eliminating the powerless: I am thinking here of unborn children, helpless victims of abortion; the elderly and incurably ill, subjected at times to euthanasia; and the many other people relegated to the margins of society by consumerism and materialism. Nor can I fail to mention the unnecessary recourse to the death penalty when other "bloodless means are sufficient to defend human lives against an aggressor and to protect public order and the safety of persons. Today, given the means at the State's disposal to deal with crime and control those who commit it, without abandoning all hope of their redemption, the cases where it is absolutely necessary to do away with an offender 'are now very rare, even non-existent practically'".229 This model of society bears the stamp of the culture of death, and is therefore in opposition to the Gospel message. Faced with this distressing reality, the Church community intends to commit itself all the more to the defense of the culture of life.

In this regard, the Synod Fathers, echoing recent documents of the Church's Magisterium, forcefully restated their unconditional respect for and total

dedication to human life from the moment of conception to that of natural death, and their condemnation of evils like abortion and euthanasia. If the teachings of the divine and natural law are to be upheld, it is essential to promote knowledge of the Church's social doctrine and to work so that the values of life and family are recognized and defended in social customs and in State ordinances.230

B. Papal Mass, St. Louis, Missouri, January 27, 1999

The new evangelization calls for followers of Christ who are unconditionally pro-life: who will proclaim, celebrate and serve the Gospel of life in every situation. A sign of hope is the increasing recognition that the dignity of human life must never be taken away, even in the case of someone who has done great evil. Modern society has the means of protecting itself, without definitively denying criminals the chance to reform (cf. Evangelium Vitae, 27). I renew the appeal I made most recently at Christmas for a consensus to end the death penalty, which is both cruel and unnecessary.

C. Christmas Day Message, 1998

May the proclamation of Christmas be a source of encouragement to all those who work to bring relief to the tormented situation in the Middle East by respecting international commitments. May Christmas help to strengthen and renew, throughout the world, the consensus concerning the need for urgent and adequate measures to halt the production and sale of arms, to defend human life, to end the death penalty, to free children and adolescents from all forms of exploitation, to restrain the bloodied hand of those responsible for genocide and crimes of war, to give environmental issues, especially after the recent natural catastrophes, the indispensable attention which they deserve for the

protection of creation and of human dignity!

D. Passages on the Death Penalty from *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life), 1995

55. ... Moreover, "legitimate defense can be not only a right but a grave duty for someone responsible for another's life, the common good of the family or of the state."44 Unfortunately, it happens that the need to render the aggressor incapable of causing harm sometimes involves taking his life. In this case, the fatal outcome is attributable to the aggressor whose action brought it about, even though he may not be morally responsible because of a lack of the use of reason.45

56. This is the context in which to place the problem of the death penalty. On this matter there is a growing tendency, both in the church and in civil society, to demand that it be applied in a very limited way or even that it be abolished completely. The problem must be viewed in the context of a system of penal justice ever more in line with human dignity and thus, in the end, with God's plan for man and society. The primary purpose of the punishment which society inflicts is "to redress the disorder caused by the offense."46 Public authority must redress the violation of personal and social rights by imposing on the offender an adequate punishment for the crime, as a condition for the offender to regain the exercise of his or her freedom. In this way authority also fulfills the purpose of defending public order and ensuring people's safety, while at the same time offering the offender an incentive and help to change his or her behavior and be rehabilitated.47

It is clear that for these purposes to be achieved, the nature and extent of the punishment must be carefully evaluated and decided upon, and ought not go to the extreme of executing the offender except in cases of

absolute necessity: In other words, when it would not be possible otherwise to defend society. Today however, as a result of steady improvements in the organization of the penal system, such cases are very rare if not practically nonexistent.

In any event, the principle set forth in the new Catechism of the Catholic Church remains valid: "If bloodless means are sufficient to defend human lives against an aggressor and to protect public order and the safety of persons, public authority must limit itself to such means, because they better correspond to the concrete conditions of the common good and are more in conformity to the dignity of the human person."48

44 Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2265. (Referring to 2266 prior to the modifications of September, 1997).

45 Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Thelogiae, II-II, q. 64, a. 7; St. Alphonsus de Liguori, Theologia Moralis, 1, III,; tr. 4, c. 1, dub. 3.

46 Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2266.

47 Cf. Ibid.

48 No. 2267

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