



EXHIBIT  
DATE 2/14/05  
HB 561

Bishop George L. Thomas  
Diocese of Helena

**House Bill 561**

"An act abolishing the death penalty  
and replacing it with life imprisonment  
without the possibility of parole"

My name is Bishop George Leo Thomas, and I am the Bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Helena. I am speaking on behalf of the Montana State Catholic Conference, in union with Bishop Anthony Milone, Bishop of the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings. Together we represent the 140,000 Roman Catholics residing in the State of Montana.

Prior to my return to Helena this past year, I served in the Archdiocese of Seattle for twenty-eight years. In addition to my pastoral duties as priest and auxiliary bishop, I also served for thirteen years as chaplain to King County's Jail, an eighteen-hundred-bed maximum-security jail in downtown Seattle.

This pastoral assignment brought into regular contact with person's accused of both misdemeanors and felonies along with their families, with legal and mental health professionals, with law enforcement agencies and corrections officials, along with victims of crime and their families. I come here, not as a stranger to the world of crime and punishment, but rather as an individual who has struggled with the complex and multi-faceted questions we are facing as we attempt to address responsibly the question of capital punishment in the State of Montana.

I would like to divide my brief remarks into four sections, beginning with an expression of solidarity with victims of crime and their families.

**(1) Solidarity with Victims of Violent Crime.**

Down through the years, I have listened to heart-wrenching stories of individuals and families whose innocent lives have been shattered by the loss of a loved one at the hands of the violent criminal. I have ministered among those who have been robbed of hopes and dreams, and whose sense of safety and well being is gone forever. Except for other victims of violent crime, none of us can fully appreciate the pain and anguish they have experienced, because we have not

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walked in their shoes. We want to stand with them, pray for them and minister among them, especially when they are confronted with hearings and media inquiries that serve to reopen the wounds and losses of the past.

**(2) Catholic Social Teaching.**

Those of you already familiar with Catholic Social Teaching will know that the formal teaching of the Catholic Church acknowledges "in principle that the state has the right to take the life of persons guilty of extremely serious crimes." But this principle cannot be overshadowed by the Church's consistent belief in the dignity of human life from the moment of conception until natural death. Nor can the principles regarding capital punishment fail to acknowledge that, "If...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 (#2267).

**(3) Higher Moral Ground**

Both the Catholic Church, with other faith communities and people of good will, recognize that anger and outrage, even calls for vengeance and retribution are natural feelings that follow the loss of a loved one at the hands of a violent criminal. Yet we firmly believe that retribution and vengeance neither heal the soul nor restore the loss of a love. We further believe that an "eye for an eye" mentality, while understandable, only perpetuates a cycle of violence and promotes the delusion that true peace of heart can be won in the absence of forgiveness.

**(4) Crime and Just Punishment**

Therefore, the Catholic Church in Montana stands in support of House Bill 561, abolishing the death penalty in the State of Montana in favor of life in prison without the possibility of parole. We believe that this bill secures the safety and protection of our people, restores the common good, punishes the convicted with a sentence short of the ultimate and irreversible punishment, provides opportunities for restorative justice, and breaks the tragic cycle of violence.

We ask you, the members of the House Judiciary Committee, to favor the higher ground provided by this bill and take "the road less traveled" and send this bill to the full House for further debate and ultimate approval.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input on a bill that has the potential to affect the quality of life and build a culture of life and love in our great State of Montana.