



EXHIBIT 17
DATE 3/25/09
SB 236

Senate Bill 236
Bill to abolish the Death Penalty
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Bishop of Helena
March 25, 2009

My name is Bishop George Leo Thomas, and I am the Roman Catholic Bishop of the Diocese of Helena. Today I am speaking on behalf of our State Catholic Conference, which represents both the Diocese of Helena and the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings, and the estimated 175,000 citizens who identify themselves as Roman Catholic in the State of Montana.

Prior to my return to Montana, where I had grown up, I served as priest and bishop for twenty eight years in the Archdiocese of Seattle. In addition to pastoral and academic duties in Seattle, I also served as chaplain for thirteen years to an 1800 bed maximum security jail in downtown Seattle. I was also Chairman of the Board for Catholic Community Services, the largest private social services provider in the State of Washington.

I come here today, not as a stranger to the world of crime and punishment, but rather as one who has struggled mightily with the challenges associated with capital punishment. During my tenure in Seattle, I had regular and sustained contact with the inmate population and their families, along with victims of violent crime who often turned to the Church for comfort and care. My pastoral work also placed me in regular contact with the legal and mental health community, with law enforcement and corrections officials, along with legislators like yourselves striving to address questions associated with the death penalty, and wanting to make decisions that are responsible, informed and humane.

The Catholic Church takes seriously its duty to speak uncomfortable truths when necessary, or to embrace unpopular positions that go against the prevailing winds of culture and society. Such may be the case today.

The Catholic Church holds the position that all life is sacred from the moment of conception until natural death. This vision is predicated upon the conviction that God alone is the Author of life and therefore the sole arbiter of death. We believe that a person's worth is inherent, even when their actions have been sub-human or their life decisions inhumane.

Our position on the death penalty is coupled with a strong sense of solidarity with victims of violent crime and their families, whose lives and sense of well-being have been altered forever. We acknowledge that except for other victims of violent crime, none of us can ever appreciate fully the anguish they have experienced or the struggles they endure on a daily basis. We want to stand in solidarity with them, minister among them, and to pray for their healing and security, particularly at this time when legislative hearings and media interest re-open the tender wounds left by the losses they have endured.

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The Catholic Church's position flows from a Gospel vision that acknowledges every person as redeemable and every soul salvageable. We support and applaud the courageous testimony of those crime victims who have warned against the futility of an "eye for an eye" mentality, and who ardently desire to break the cycle of violence that is perpetuated by the death penalty mentality. Their lives have been living testimony to the power of restorative justice, and underscore the Church's long held conviction that even the most hardened criminal can experience redemption and a change of heart. This vision of human life prompts us to conclude that the death penalty should be replaced by values that interrupt the cycle of violence and create opportunities for restorative justice, redemption, and healing for all.

Dr. Albert Schweitzer once opined that "example is not the main thing in influencing others. It's the only thing." Every parent, teacher and pastor knows that example is the first and best teacher and moral consistency is a necessary ingredient when conveying moral values to the next generation. The Catholic Church challenges the State's position that you teach killing is wrong by killing killers. Such is the message of state-sanctioned homicide. The moral disconnect is both apparent and appalling, and cries out for redress and correction. We hold that the dismantling of the death penalty machinery in favor of life in prison without the possibility of parole will help to address the moral incongruity presented by the death penalty laws that are now on the books in the State of Montana.

Finally, we hold that advances in public safety, including penal technology and the intensive management of prison populations, provide the means necessary to make the death penalty dated, obsolete, and unnecessary.

We believe that the late Pope John Paul II expresses accurately our moral position: "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 " We hold that these advances are well in place in the State of Montana.

In sum, the Catholic Church in the State of Montana stands in support of Senate Bill 236, to abolish the death penalty in favor of life in prison without the possibility of parole. We hold that this bill secures public safety, promotes restorative justice, provides moral consonance, and helps to break the tragic cycle of violence.

We ask you, the members of the House Judiciary Committee, to favor the higher moral ground presented by SB 236, which will help us promote a Culture of Life in our great State of Montana.