



Statement of the Catholic Bishops of Florida In Opposition to Constitutional Amendment No. 1

October 10, 2002

We write in opposition to proposed Amendment No. 1 on the November 5, 2002 election ballot. The amendment deals with “Excessive Punishments” and proposes to enshrine the death penalty in the Florida Constitution, which we oppose.

Under Florida Law, in accordance with today’s Constitution, there are two options for sentencing a person convicted of first degree murder: a death sentence, or life imprisonment without parole. Life in prison without parole is not mentioned in the proposed amendment, yet increasing numbers of Floridians and Americans are expressing their support for this alternative.

We have joined with the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, in opposing the use of the death penalty, “except in cases of absolute necessity”; in other words, when it would not be possible otherwise to defend society. Today however, such cases are very rare if not practically nonexistent.

Almost without exception, Western civilization agrees with this position by abolishing capital punishment, leaving the United States to stand with such countries as Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and China. The United Nations, Amnesty International and other international bodies have condemned it. Just this year, the United States Supreme Court has significantly restricted its use in this country, and even today our own sentencing law remains in question.

More Florida inmates have been exonerated after long terms on death row than any other state in the country. Thousands of Floridians have submitted petitions for a moratorium on the use of the death penalty, seeking review of its many serious problems. They join increasing numbers of Americans who support a moratorium. (“51% of Americans support a moratorium” *ABC News Poll, April, 2001.*) Now is not the time to place the death penalty in our State Constitution.

We seek the conversion of sinners, no matter how bad, that they may seek and receive the love and forgiveness of Almighty God. This amendment seeks to assure the death penalty for some of them, perhaps before they reconcile with their Maker. It seeks to respond to killing with killing, to violence with violence. State sanctioned killing touches us all, diminishing the value we place on human life. Florida should not stand against the tide of civilization’s demand for humane responses to crime.

We urge the defeat of Constitutional Amendment No. 1.

Archbishop John C. Favalora
Archdiocese of Miami

Bishop John J. Nevins
Diocese of Venice

Bishop Norbert M. Dorsey, CP
Diocese of Orlando

Bishop John H. Ricard, SSJ
Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee

Bishop Robert N. Lynch
Diocese of St. Petersburg

Bishop Victor B. Galeone
Diocese of St. Augustine

Reverend James Murtagh
Diocese of Palm Beach
Apostolic Administrator

Bishop Agustín A. Román
Archdiocese of Miami

Bishop Gilberto Fernández
Archdiocese of Miami

Bishop Thomas G. Wenski
Archdiocese of Miami