

Antilles Episcopal Conference (AEC) Statement on Capital punishment during the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy

AEC Bishops urge Governments and citizens in the region to work towards the abolition of the death penalty

1. HUMAN LIFE IS GIFT FROM GOD

We believe that human life is a gift from God and is sacred. We believe each human being has inherent dignity because we are all created in God's image and likeness (Genesis 1:26; Ephesians 2:10). Therefore we should protect and defend human life at all stages of development and in all circumstances.

2. While we are appalled by the rise of violent crime in our region and express solidarity with victims of crime and all those affected by crime, we urge politicians and citizens in our region to abolish capital punishment/the death penalty and embrace a *restorative justice* approach to crime and violence.

3. RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

A *restorative justice* approach focuses on holding the offender accountable in a more meaningful way and helping to achieve a sense of healing for both the victim(s) and the community; it embraces socialization, rehabilitation and reconciliation rather than retribution and vengeance.

4. All recent International studies and research show that capital punishment does not act as a deterrent, nor does it foster respect for life in our communities. We re-iterate the sentiments expressed in the AEC Pastoral Letter on *Capital Punishment* (2000) which stated: **“The prophetic voice of the Church must be heard especially in times of moral and social crisis...regardless of the potential unpopularity of our Gospel message...Capital punishment symbolises a form of despair for the effective reform of persons.”**
5. The AEC Pastoral Letter *The Gift of Life* (2008), expressed the **“firm desire that the leaders and people of Caribbean society move toward the total abolition of the Death Penalty...we should place emphasis on the rehabilitation of the offender rather than on his/her elimination”**.
6. We believe that God's infinite mercy extends to everyone – including those who have committed heinous crimes, who should be given opportunities to repent and to find peace with God and others.
7. We believe that the protection of society and the common good are assured by a proper functioning justice system that detects and convicts, and by a prison system which

focuses on rehabilitation. As the Holy Father affirms: “a growing opposition to the death penalty even for the legitimate defence of society because modern means exist to efficiently repress crime without definitively denying the persons who committed it the possibility of rehabilitating themselves.”

8. CAPITAL PUNISHMENT IS NOT THE ANSWER

We agree with Pope Francis who said during his visit to a prison in Mexico in February 2016: “Divine Mercy reminds us that prisons are an indication of the kind of society we are. In many cases they are a sign of the silence and omissions which have led to a throwaway culture, a symptom of a culture that has stopped supporting life, of a society that has abandoned its children.”

9. In February 2016, the Holy Father speaking to thousands at St Peter’s Square in the Vatican, asked politicians around the world to make “a courageous and exemplary gesture” during the Church's current Holy Year of Mercy which extends from December 8, 2015 to November 20, 2016. He said: “I appeal to the consciences of those who govern to reach an international consensus to abolish the death penalty...The commandment 'You shall not kill,' has absolute value and applies to both the innocent and the guilty.

10. We are aware that the latest execution that took place in our region was in 2008 (Charles Elroy Laplace, St Kitts & Nevis), and that the rulings in a number of judgments by the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council since the judgment handed down in the case of Pratt and Morgan v The Attorney-General of Jamaica (1993) have made it almost impossible for the death penalty to be carried out. We are also aware that even though the Caribbean states that have not abolished the death penalty have not carried out any execution for the last ten years, some have sentenced persons to death during this decade.

11. AMEND LEGISLATION TO REMOVE THE DEATH PENALTY

As a first step, we encourage the Governments of Trinidad and Tobago and Barbados to amend their legislation to remove the mandatory imposition of the death penalty. We also make a plea for the Governments of the English-speaking Caribbean to support the 2016 UN resolution on a Moratorium on the use of the death penalty with a view to its abolition which will be presented at the 71st session of the UN General Assembly, and to improve prison conditions. We acknowledge positive developments in relation to this issue, such as the abolition of the death penalty by the Parliament of Suriname on the 3rd day of March, 2015.

12. We will continue to work with Governments and other stakeholders in our region to build safer, just and peaceful societies and to do so by encouraging the use of non-lethal means to achieve our goals. Let us all play our part to promote morals and values that will assist us in building peaceful communities that promote the common good – creating conditions that will allow each person to realise his/her potential.

13. REFORM THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

We urge our Governments to strengthen the capacity of public institutions, including criminal justice systems, to address crime and violence; to address the risk factors that contribute to crime, for example: poverty, urban decay, social inequality and exclusion, family disintegration, poor parenting, lack of quality education and employment, poor housing, the proliferation of guns, drugs and gangs in the region, and to employ related preventive measures. We stand ready and urge our faithful and all people of good will to work together to this end.

14. God's plan is for us to live in peace and right relationship with Him, with each other and with all of His Creation. Our communities need healing. Let us pray and work for the renewal of hearts and minds and find more sustainable and effective solutions aimed at reducing crime and violence in our region and in the world. During this Holy Year of Mercy, let us recognise and embrace the power of divine mercy which makes all things new.

15. Heavenly Father,

We thank you for the wondrous gift of life you have granted to us.

We thank you even more for having restored us, through your Son Jesus Christ, who gave His life for us out of love, while we were still sinners.

We echo the words of PRAISE of our Blessed Mother Mary: (Lk. 1:50-51)

**FOR YOUR MERCY IS UPON GENERATION AFTER GENERATION
TOWARD THOSE WHO FEAR YOU.**

“You have done mighty deeds with Your arm”

Through her intercession, we ask you, Heavenly Father,
to make us protectors of all lives, including those of culprits and criminals,
for no one, in your eyes, is excluded from your mercy and conversion.
Grant to all of us a greater respect for life,
so that we may overcome evil with love.
We ask this through Christ, our Lord. Amen

SIGNED:

1. Archbishop Patrick Pinder, Nassau (President of the Conference)
2. Archbishop Joseph Harris, C.S.Sp., Port of Spain
3. Archbishop Robert Rivas, O.P., Castires
4. Archbishop Elect Kenneth Richards, Kingston
5. Archbishop David Macaire, O.P., St. Pierre & Fort-de-France
6. Archbishop Charles Dufour, Kingston
7. Bishop Francis Alleyne, OSB, Georgetown (Vice President of the Conference)
8. Bishop Gabriel Malzaire, Roseau

9. Bishop Jason Gordon, Bridgetown
10. Bishop Emmanuel Lafont, Cayenne
11. Bishop Karel Choennie, Paramaribo
12. Bishop Gerard County, C.S.Sp., Kingstown
13. Bishop Christopher Glancy, C.S.V., (Auxiliary) Belize City & Belmopan
14. Fr. Clifton Harris, O.P. (Diocesan Administrator), St. George's
15. Bishop Luis Secco, Willemstad
16. Bishop Jean-Yves Riocreux, Basseterre-Pointe-a-Pitre
17. Bishop Wieslaw Spiewak, C.R., Hamilton
18. Bishop Burchell McPherson, Montego Bay
19. Bishop Robert Llanos, (Auxiliary) Port of Spain