



# INTRODUCTION

At the 60th Annual Plenary Meeting of the Bishops of the Antilles Episcopal Conference (AEC) held in Trinidad in April 2016, the Bishops agreed to publish in this Jubilee Year of Mercy a Statement on Capital Punishment. One of the main aims is to sensitize the faithful and policy makers in the Region of the importance of ending the Death Penalty in our Region.

The decision was taken by the Bishops to publish the Statement in two formats: a short Statement - see Part A, issued on 4 July, 2016, and a long Statement - see Part B, issued on 21 September 2016, which contains more technical language for policy makers and all those who can influence change in the laws in our Region. The two Statements have been incorporated in this booklet which is offered to you as a Catholic perspective on the on-going debate on this important issue in the Region and globally.

“The AEC is the episcopal conference of the English, French and Dutch territories of the Caribbean, with the exception of Haiti. This is the geographical area entrusted to the pastoral care of the Bishops of the AEC. The Catholic Church within these territories comprises five Provinces, consisting of five archdioceses, fourteen dioceses and two Independent Missions, i.e., twenty-one ecclesiastical units in all. Politically, within the five Provinces there are thirteen independent nations (Belize, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, Antigua and Barbuda, St. Lucia, Grenada, Dominica, Guyana, Suriname, The Bahamas, St. Kitts-Nevis, three Departments of France (Guadeloupe, French Guyana, Martinique), two parts of the Kingdom of the Netherlands having complete internal autonomy (Curacao + and Aruba ), and six British colonies (Bermuda, Cayman Islands, Anguilla, British Virgin Islands, Montserrat and Turks and Caicos Islands). In addition, one United States Dependency, St. Thomas, enjoys observer status” (<http://aecrc.org/wp/about-aec/>).



# **PART A - SHORT STATEMENT**

Statement on Capital Punishment by the Roman Catholic Bishops of the  
Antilles Episcopal Conference (AEC) in the Caribbean during the  
Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy  
(Dec 8 2015 - Nov 20 2016)

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

## **HUMAN LIFE IS GIFT FROM GOD**

1. 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.

## **RESTORATIVE JUSTICE**

3. 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 retribu-

tion 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 that 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.”

## **CAPITAL PUNISHMENT IS NOT THE ANSWER**

8. 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 throw-away 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.

## **AMEND LEGISLATION TO REMOVE THE DEATH PENALTY**

11. 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.

## **REFORM THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM**

13. 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 conver-  
sion.

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



# PART B- LONG STATEMENT

Statement on Capital Punishment by the Roman Catholic Bishops of the  
Antilles Episcopal Conference (AEC) in the Caribbean during the  
Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy  
(Dec 8 2015 - Nov 20 2016)

## **HUMAN LIFE IS GIFT FROM GOD**

1. We, the Roman Catholic Bishops of the Antilles Episcopal Conference in the Caribbean welcome the proclamation by Pope Francis of a Holy Year of Mercy which commenced with the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception on the 8th day of December 2015, and which will end on the Feast of Christ the King on the 20th day of November 2016.
2. During this period we are re-doubling our efforts to fulfill the Holy Father's desire that "all those places where the Church is present, especially our parishes and our communities, may become islands of mercy in the midst of the sea of indifference!"<sup>[1]</sup>
3. We continue to "serve the Church as official teachers of the faithful: to inform consciences of Christians, to appeal to the justice and goodwill of all peoples, and to assist and challenge state leaders in the protection and greater development of the common good. Our moral teaching finds its source in Scripture, and it follows the sacred traditions of the Apostolic Church. From these, our teaching consistently promotes an 'ethic of life.'"<sup>[2]</sup>
4. We join with the Universal Church to express our belief 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.

5. In accordance with our ethic of life and in light of the present situation in the Caribbean, we commend to the Faithful and to all people of goodwill two of our Pastoral Letters, namely:
  - a. Jubilee Year 2000, Antilles Episcopal Conference Pastoral Letter on Capital Punishment; and
  - b. We are called to proclaim, celebrate and serve The Gift of Life, Pastoral Letter of the Antilles Episcopal Conference, Rome, March 29 2008.
6. We reaffirm that “the prophetic voice of the Church must be heard especially in times of moral and social crisis.”<sup>[3]</sup> Thus, while we are appalled by the rise of violent crime in our region and express solidarity with the victims of crime and all those affected by crime, we urge politicians and citizens in our region to abolish capital punishment, that is, the death penalty and embrace a restorative justice approach to crime and violence.
7. As believers in Jesus Christ, “the Gospel of life is at the heart of the evangelizing mission of the Church, which must proclaim Jesus, the Word of life (John 1:1)... Jesus invites all people to celebrate and proclaim that they are people of life because God has redeemed us through the Cross, the source of all life. God has entrusted the Church with the responsibility of proclaiming, celebrating and serving the gift of life.”<sup>[4]</sup>

## **RESTORATIVE JUSTICE**

8. 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. Restorative Justice can help us to achieve our goals. It is not a panacea for all social ills, but can be used effectively together with other policies. The key watchwords of a Restorative

Justice approach lie at the heart of Christian living, for example, repentance, conversion, reparation, restoration, restitution, reconciliation, rehabilitation, forgiveness, empowerment, and re-integration with a sense of responsibility — as opposed to revenge, retribution, and vengeance. As we stated in our Pastoral Letter on Capital Punishment (2000): “...in all cases punishment must be guided by the spirit of love, which intends both the good of the transgressor as well as the good of the community. The spirit of revenge lacks this twofold Christian intention...”<sup>[5]</sup>

9. Pope Francis is urging nations to realise that God’s justice is his mercy and that God is the essence of mercy. 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. To build just, merciful societies, we must all play our part to put in place systems, procedures, and practices that will promote right relationships — with God, with ourselves, with each other, and with all of creation.
10. 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. Hence, regardless of the potential unpopularity of our Gospel message that informs our position, we reaffirm the position: “Capital punishment symbolizes a form of despair for the effective reform of persons.”<sup>[6]</sup>
11. 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”.<sup>[7]</sup>
12. 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.”<sup>[8]</sup>

## **CAPITAL PUNISHMENT IS NOT THE ANSWER**

13. We stated in our Pastoral Letter, *The Gift of Life* (2008) that “Very often those who support capital punishment invoke the text, ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’ (the ‘lex talionis’ – Lev. 24:20). This was, of course a most important development in the Old Testament’s understanding of justice. Justice must not seek revenge. The punishment due from injustice must be rational and not excessive. However, the ‘lex talionis’ was not the last word on this matter. In fact, Jesus gave us the last word: ‘you have heard that it was said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you: do not oppose evil with evil ...’ (Mt. 5:38-39).”<sup>[9]</sup> Of course Jesus became the best example of this teaching as he was an innocent man who became the victim of capital punishment.
14. We affirm that the Scriptures and the Church’s teaching does not provide the basis for the reintroduction or renewed use of the death penalty which continues to be under discussion in the region. “Violence always provokes more violence and deepens the culture of death.”<sup>[10]</sup>
15. Pope Benedict XVI continued the work of Pope St John Paul II by encouraging countries around the world to end the death penalty as a legal sanction, for example, at his November 30, 2011 general audience.<sup>[11]</sup>
16. Pope Francis has repeatedly called for the abolition of the death penalty. For example, on 20 March 2015 he outlined the Catholic Church’s opposition to capital punishment in a letter to the International Commission against the Death Penalty. He said: “For the rule of law, the death penalty represents a failure, as it obliges the state to kill in the name of justice. There is discussion in some quar-

ters about the method of killing, as if it were possible to find ways of 'getting it right'. But there is no humane way of killing another person."<sup>[12]</sup> We agree with him when he said during his visit to a prison in Mexico in February 2016 that: "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."<sup>[13]</sup>

17. 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 this Holy Year of Mercy. He said: "A spreading opposition to the death penalty, even as an instrument of legitimate social defence, has developed in public opinion, and this is a sign of hope. In fact, modern societies have the ability to effectively control crime without definitively taking away a criminal's chance to redeem himself. The issue lies in the context of a perspective on a criminal justice system that is ever more conformed to the dignity of man and God's design for man and for society. And also a criminal justice system that is open to the hope of reintegration in society. The commandment "thou shall not kill" has absolute value and pertains to the innocent as well as the guilty. The Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy is a propitious occasion to promote in the world a growing maturity for ways to respect life and the dignity of each person. Because even a criminal has the inviolable right to life, a gift of God. I appeal to the consciences of those who govern to reach an international consensus to abolish the death penalty."<sup>[14]</sup>

18. In his video message to participants at the 6th World Congress Against the Death Penalty in Oslo, Norway, 21-23 June, 2016, Pope Francis said that capital punishment "contradicts God's plan for individuals and society, and his merciful justice." He called for a world 'free of the death penalty'. Indeed, he said, "nowadays the death penalty is unacceptable, however grave the crime of the convicted person. It is an offence to the inviolability of life and to the dignity of the human person...it is not consonant with any purpose

of punishment. It does not render justice to victims, but instead fosters vengeance.”<sup>[15]</sup>

19. We are aware that the latest execution that took place in our region was in 2008 (Charles Elroy Laplace, St Kitts & Nevis)<sup>[16]</sup>, 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)<sup>[17]</sup> 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.

## **RENEW SOCIETY AND PROMOTE THE COMMON GOOD**

20. We stand with Archbishop Patrick Pinder, President of the Antilles Episcopal Conference, in his expression of solidarity with the victims of crime. Delivering the homily at the Red Mass in Nassau in 2009, he said: “It is important to note that while we oppose the death penalty, we embrace the victims of violent crimes; those who are hurting and grieving for their loved ones who have been killed, at times in the most heinous ways. We urge each parish to establish victim support groups and seek to meet their physical, mental, spiritual, financial and other needs.”<sup>[18]</sup>
21. “Faithful to the mission of Jesus Christ who came ‘that they may have life and have it abundantly’ (John 10:10), we...once again wish to proclaim, celebrate and serve the gift of life. We wish to affirm the Church’s teaching in regard to the inherent dignity of every human being. As such, every effort must be made to protect and preserve the sanctity of life...”<sup>[19]</sup> As Christians we are to be ‘people of and for life’, we are to be genuinely pro-life, with a proper understanding of what this means: ‘To be actively pro-life is to contribute to the renewal of society through the promotion of the common good. (However) it is impossible to further the common

good without acknowledging and defending the right to life.”<sup>[20]</sup>

22. “As pastors intimately involved in the life of our Caribbean people, we share every day the ‘joys and the hopes, the grief and the anxieties’<sup>[21]</sup> of the faithful. In the present crisis of violent crime and increasing public disorder, many of our people face personal and social dangers. We share the pain of the victims of the many forms of human brutality. Our Lord Jesus was deeply moved by the suffering of the poor, the sick, the powerless, and those grieved by death and personal loss. As Christ’s disciples, united to him as brothers and sisters, we also burn with compassion, and we cry out for justice. Especially in those tragic situations of extreme violence, in which persons or society as a whole are wounded by acts of gross inhumanity...we entrust and submit our compassion for the victims and our desire for justice to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, whose wisdom and truth transcends our limited human standards. Placing our hope and trust in God in such severe situations is a difficult responsibility — one that requires courage, perseverance and a spirit of prayerful discernment.”<sup>[22]</sup> We condemn the conditions and circumstances that make for situations where crime and violence are perpetuated causing death and injury. In addition, we appeal and pray for the conversion of persons who contemplate and become accessories to such injustice, that their conscience abhors the committing of such gross inhumanity on their fellow citizens.
23. “Continuing the mission of our Lord, Christians are called to participate in the ministry of reconciliation: bringing physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual healing to individual persons; and developing a peace and justice in society that would be characteristic of the Kingdom of God. We have, then, like the Good Samaritan on the road to Jericho, first a special call to care for those who have been personally wounded by acts of violence — the victims themselves, as well as their relatives and friends. We offer the loving support of our Church communities through counselling and genuine friendship, as well as through faithful perseverance in private and communal prayer, asking for the merciful and saving

power of our God.”<sup>[23]</sup>

24. To promote integral human development in our region, we recognize the urgent need for our governments to address the underlying causes of crime and the risk factors that contribute to crime and not only the symptoms of crime. To do so, they must take into consideration the many challenges to human life today, including poverty and social exclusion, human trafficking, the sex trade, including exploitation of women and children, domestic violence, the drug and gun trade.
  
25. We urge our governments to consider recommendations made in reports such as the United Nations Development Programme’s report: “Caribbean Human Development Report 2012: Human Development and the shift to better citizen security”<sup>[24]</sup> which states, inter alia, that “The human development approach to crime and violence in the Caribbean is hampered by the lack of institutional capacity of public institutions such as the police, judiciary and penitential systems.” Their 26 main recommendations focus on issues such as: Reducing Victimization, Reducing risk and building youth resilience, Controlling street gangs and organized crime, Transforming the Police, Reforming the Justice System, and Building capacity for evidence-based policy.

## **ADDRESS THE REAL DETERRENTS TO CRIME**

26. “Judicial commissions, both local and international, sociologists and criminologists largely agree that there is no empirical evidence to support the claim that the death penalty reduces the frequency of capital offences.<sup>[25]</sup> “On the contrary, some experts have even argued that jurisdictions that have abolished capital punishment have actually recorded decreasing homicide rates.<sup>[26]</sup> The most important deterrent to criminal activity is not the threat of execution, but rather the risk of apprehension and conviction for the crime committed.<sup>[27]</sup> Enforcement agencies and judicial processes that are most effective in exercising their authority provide the greatest de-

terrent to crime, even when the nature of the penalty is less severe. To call for the resumption of executions is to deflect attention away from true deterrents, and to ignore the reforms necessary for the instruments of civil justice to act as effective agencies for the prevention of social disorder.<sup>[28]</sup>

27. "There is more and more evidence, especially with the advent of DNA testing, that innocent persons have been convicted of capital crimes and have unjustly lost their lives by state execution. To take the life of one convicted of a capital crime is a final judgment which categorically denies the possibility of judicial error. By contrast, to acknowledge the fallibility of our human institutions is to allow for the possible innocence of the one convicted of a crime, and thus to avoid a penalty for which there can be no appeal, reversal or compensation".<sup>[29]</sup>
28. "We must also candidly admit that legal processes require financial and human resources that are not equally available to all in society. The poor and the marginalized often have limited access to good legal counsel and representation, which weakens a full and fair judicial process, and intensifies the danger of convicting and executing the innocent. It is a great concern for us that those condemned to die are disproportionately poor, and without the benefit of adequate legal defense."<sup>[30]</sup>
29. "Political and economic rights are intrinsically related: the common good as well as the integrity of the individual is threatened by economic deprivation. The state, therefore, must do everything in its power to promote the production of a sufficient supply of material goods, the use of which is necessary for the practice of virtue."<sup>[31]</sup>
30. In the face of widespread Caribbean poverty, politicians calling for capital punishment not only risk gross injustice; they also undermine their own legitimacy as responsible leaders. As Pope John XXIII taught: "considerations of justice and equity... demand that those involved in civil government give more attention to the less fortunate members of the community, since they are less able to



defend their rights and to assert their legitimate claims...”<sup>[32]</sup>

31. “Capital punishment symbolises a form of despair for the effective reform of persons. Our Christian hope for the conversion and reform of criminals, by contrast, signifies our uncompromising faith in the redeeming grace of God that acts upon humanity’s natural dignity to restore order both to the person and to society. This hope is based on our witness to the mercy and forgiveness of Jesus, who, when confronted with the guilt of the woman caught in adultery, transcended the death penalty of Israel’s law by exposing the universal need for repentance and conversion: ‘He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her’” (John 8:7).<sup>[33]</sup>

## **NURTURE AN ALL-INCLUSIVE COMPASSION**

32. “Our experience of salvation in Christ is first an awareness of our need for forgiveness, and then an overwhelming sense of God’s grace that returns to us our dignity as persons made in the image of our Creator.”<sup>[34]</sup> We, in turn, are given a share in Christ’s own mission of forgiveness; (John 20:23), which restores true dignity by allowing the grace of God to bring about conversion in the sinner. Capital punishment deprives us of our mission to forgive, and the transgressor of an opportunity to reform. <sup>[35]</sup>
33. “Our Christian compassion is the expression of our hope in the reform of those who have violated the moral order. It is the means by which we cooperate with God’s grace to bring about personal conversion and social development. We follow Christ, who chooses to be with sinners and social outcasts, because ‘it is not those who are healthy that need a physician, but the sick’” (Mark 2:17).<sup>[36]</sup>
34. “Our compassion is not misdirected, but rather all-inclusive, and it intends specifically in the present context the protection of human dignity and the conversion of transgressors. Jesus suffered the reproach of the religious and political leaders of the times for his association with and care for sinners, even those who would be

guilty in the law of the day of capital crimes. We imitate our Lord, the Good Shepherd, who is willing to leave the ninety nine—sheep in order to seek the one lost, for ‘...there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety—nine righteous persons who need no repentance’” (Luke 15:7).<sup>[37]</sup>

35. We encourage all Christians in the Caribbean to teach by both word and example the moral and social dangers of capital punishment. There is no teaching more effective than that of example, and so the members of the Church are exhorted to be “a shining example by their sense of responsibility and their dedication to the common good.”<sup>[38]</sup> Concretely this means that we must avoid all forms of lawlessness and selfishness that threaten the very fabric of ordered society. We observe a climate of lawlessness in our countries. Many persons, while appealing for state execution, contribute to this climate by tolerating or co—operating in structures of various forms of political and business corruption, and illegality. It is by our righteousness that we “act as a leaven in the world,”<sup>[39]</sup> providing solid foundations for the development of society. We give credible witness to our teaching against the injustice of the death penalty only if we avoid participating in the many agents of social destruction, and if we contribute to the protection and enhancement of human dignity.<sup>[40]</sup>
36. It is important that we support each other as Christians to proclaim this message of reconciliation, mercy and love. In the past, official Church teaching allowed the possibility that legitimate public authority could impose the death penalty in “cases of extreme gravity”.<sup>[41]</sup> But all of the considerations we have made above — Scriptural, theological, sociological and existential — lead us now to evaluate the exercise of capital punishment with an attitude of strong denunciation. It is an imperative which obliges each and every man and woman, as well as societies and nations. And although our reflections are grounded in the Caribbean context, we share the judgement of our own universal Church leaders along with many social and religious leaders world—wide: “A sign of hope is the increasing recognition that the dignity of 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.<sup>[42]</sup> The death penalty is both cruel and unnecessary.”<sup>[43]</sup>

## **PROMOTE A PROCESS OF RECONCILIATION**

37. We repeat, however, our concern for the victim of violence. To reject capital punishment is not to make light of the loss of loved ones and the violation of human dignity and rights experienced by victims of crime. The pastoral care of the Church is directed first towards the comfort and assistance of these victims. But part of this assistance involves letting the experience of the Cross, which is one of innocent suffering, lead to reconciliation. Capital punishment does not assist the criminal to reform, or society to deter. Neither does it assist the victim to restore his or her violated dignity. Only genuine reconciliation can achieve personal satisfaction and restore social order. The process of reconciliation involves conversion, reform, restitution, and forgiveness.<sup>[44]</sup>
38. Jesus explicitly commanded his followers to forgive “from your heart” (Matt. 21:35). How are we to understand this command in the context of widespread crime and murder? He does not mean to release a murderer unpunished to prey upon other victims. Jesus teaches forgiveness not as an end in itself, but as an essential element in the process of reconciliation, as reflected in Jesus’ own practice of forgiveness. There are two parties involved in reconciliation: the wrongdoer and the victim. A process of reconciliation involves obligations of both parties. For the wrongdoer, there must be recognition and confession of his/her sin, accompanied by real contrition. The sincerity of contrition means that the wrongdoer must be willing to make restitution, like Zacchaeus, who, when he repented, promised to pay back four times as much to everyone he defrauded (Luke 19:8). In the case of murder, provision should be pursued to facilitate the principle that restitution involves taking on obligations to the victim’s family and community. Finally, the

wrongdoer must reform his/her life. “Go,” Jesus said to the sinful woman, “and sin no more” (Mt. 8: 11). On the part of the victim’s family and the community, the process of reconciliation demands an attitude and a willingness to forgive, and to restore a relationship with the contrite and reformed wrongdoer. As shown in Jesus’ practice of the reconciliation of sinners, forgiveness can also be a powerful form to help the sinner towards conversion: “Her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love” (Lk. 7:47).<sup>[45]</sup>

39. What we have just described is an ideal situation of reconciliation, which is reflected in the sacramental process of the Catholic Church. In civil society, penal laws and institutions are necessary because the conditions of reconciliation are not often fully met. But the goal of reconciliation, the restoration of moral order to society, is the purpose of those institutions, and it is the purpose of the Christian practice of forgiveness. In virtue of our prophetic call as Christians, then, we exhort all peoples to the promotion of the intrinsic dignity and inviolability of all human life, as a condition for full human development. In this way, we follow our Lord Jesus Christ, who came that we might “have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn. 10: 10). To take away a person’s basic right to immunity from fatal harm is to compromise his/her sacred dignity. We therefore... “appeal for the development of a consensus among the people of the world to abolish capital punishment”<sup>[46]</sup> as all life is of worth and must be respected. Let us put our efforts into building communities of love. We conclude with the words of Pope St John Paul II: “I do not hesitate to proclaim before you and before the world that all human life — from the moment of conception and through all subsequent stages — is sacred, because human life is created in the image of and likeness of God. Nothing surpasses the greatness or dignity of a human person...All human beings ought to value every person for his or her uniqueness as a creature of God, called to be a brother or sister of Christ by reason of the Incarnation and the universal redemption. For us, the sacredness of human life is based on these premises. And it is on these same premises that there is based our celebration of life — all human life. This explains our ef-

forts to defend human life against every influence or action that threatens or weakens it, as well as our endeavours to make every life more human in all its aspects. And so, we will stand up every time that human life is threatened.”<sup>[47]</sup>

## **AMEND LEGISLATION TO REMOVE THE DEATH PENALTY**

40. It is our firm desire that the leaders and people of our 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. “Non-lethal forms of punishment are more in keeping with the concrete conditions of the common good and more in conformity with the dignity of the human person.”<sup>[48]</sup>
41. 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.
42. We remain committed 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.

## **REFORM THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM**

43. 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.
44. 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.
45. 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: For your mercy is upon generation after generation toward those who fear you. You have done mighty deeds with your arm. (Lk 1:50-51)

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

Published with the consent of all Bishops of the Antilles Episcopal Con-

ference.

Port of Spain, Trinidad on Wednesday, September 21, 2016.

The Feast of St. Matthew, the Apostle and Evangelist

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., Castries
4. **Archbishop Kenneth Richards**, Kingston
5. **Archbishop David Macaire**, O.P., St. Pierre & Fort-de-France
6. **Archbishop Emeritus Charles Dufour**, Apostolic Administrator of Mandeville
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. **Bishop Luis Secco**, Willemstad
15. **Bishop Jean-Yves Riocreux**, Basseterre-Pointe-a-Pitre
16. **Bishop Wieslaw Spiewak**, C.R., Hamilton
17. **Bishop Burchell McPherson**, Montego Bay
18. **Bishop Robert Llanos**, Apostolic Administrator St. John's Basseterre
19. **Fr. Clifton Harris**, O.P., Diocesan Administrator, St. George's

- [1] Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for Lent 2015: Make your hearts firm (Jas 5:8), para. 2
- [2] Jubilee Year 2000, Antilles Episcopal Conference Pastoral Letter on Capital Punishment, para.2
- [3] Ibid, para.1
- [4] We are called to proclaim, celebrate and serve The Gift of Life, Pastoral Letter of the Antilles Episcopal Conference, Rome, 29 March 2008, para.1
- [5] Jubilee Year 2000, Antilles Episcopal Conference Pastoral Letter on Capital Punishment, para.8
- [6] Ibid, para. 1
- [7] We are called to proclaim, celebrate and serve The Gift of Life, Pastoral Letter of the Antilles Episcopal Conference, Rome, 29 March 2008, para. 32
- [8] Pope Francis, Feb 21, 2015, St Peter's Square, Rome – <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/pope-francis-calls-for-worldwide-ban-on-death-penalty-a6887376.html>
- [9] We are called to proclaim, celebrate and serve The Gift of Life, Pastoral Letter of the Antilles Episcopal Conference, Rome, 29 March 2008, para. 32
- [10] Ibid, para 33
- [11] <http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/pope-benedict-end-the-death-penalty>
- [12] <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/pope-francis-death-penalty-inadmissible>
- [13] [https://w2.vatican.va/content/.../papa-francesco\\_20160217\\_mesico-detenuiti.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/.../papa-francesco_20160217_mesico-detenuiti.html)
- [14] [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2016/documents/papa-francesco\\_angelus\\_20160221.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2016/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20160221.html)
- [15] <https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2016/06/21/pope-francis-calls-world-free-death-penalty>
- [16] <http://www.handsoffcain.info/bancadati/schedastato.php?id-stato=20000223&idcontinente=24>
- [17] Pratt and Morgan v The Attorney-General of Jamaica (1993 43 WIR 340)
- [18] Archbishop Pinder, Red Mass Homily, 2009 [http://www.rcsocialjusticett.org/downloads/deathpen\\_abppinder.pdf](http://www.rcsocialjusticett.org/downloads/deathpen_abppinder.pdf)



[19] We are called to proclaim, celebrate and serve The Gift of Life, Pastoral Letter of the Antilles Episcopal Conference, Rome, 29 March 2008, para 2

[20] Ibid, para 11

[21] The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965, para. 1

[22] Jubilee Year 2000, Antilles Episcopal Conference Pastoral Letter on Capital Punishment, para.3

[23] Ibid, para. 4

[24] Caribbean Human Development Report 2012: Human Development and the shift to better citizen security": [http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/corporate/HDR/Latin%20America%20and%20Caribbean%20HDR/C\\_bean\\_HDR\\_Jan25\\_2012\\_3MB.pdf](http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/corporate/HDR/Latin%20America%20and%20Caribbean%20HDR/C_bean_HDR_Jan25_2012_3MB.pdf)

[25] Jubilee Year 2000, Antilles Episcopal Conference Pastoral Letter on Capital Punishment, para 14, n 12: This is the consistent opinion of many experts. In the US for example, "A survey of experts from the American Society of Criminology, the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences and the Law and Society Association showed that, over 80% believe the existing research fails to support a deterrence justification for the death penalty" — M. Radelet and M. Akers, *Deterrence and the Death Penalty? The Views of Experts*, 1995. This is supported by Roger Hood in his research for the UN in *The Death Penalty: A World-wide Perspective* (Oxford, 1996), p. 238, para. 328. Research in the Caribbean has yielded the same conclusions. In Jamaica, the Barnet Commission (1974) questioned the use of hanging as a deterrent to murder and violent crime (para. 250); likewise, in Trinidad and Tobago, the Abdulah Report (1980) concluded that "... there is no clear statistical evidence that the death penalty does inhibit persons from committing murder (n. 7.46); the lack of scientific evidence in favour of capital punishment as a deterrent led Jamaica's Frazer Commission (1979) to recommend "... that death as a penalty for murder should be abolished" (n. 18)

[26] Ibid, para 14, n.13: *Homicide Studies*, Vol. I, No. 2 (May 1997), indicates that executions may actually increase the number of murders, rather than deter murders. See also Roger Hood, *Op. Cit.*, p. 187, para. 253

[27] Ibid, para 14, n.14: The late Dr. Carl Stone, prominent Jamaican so-

cial scientist, concluded that "... the suggestion that hanging deters murder has no basis in fact" and pointed to the low probability of apprehension as the most significant obstacle to effective deterrence, *The Daily Gleaner*, October 4, 1982

[28] *Ibid*, para.14

[29] *Ibid*, para.15

[30] Jubilee Year 2000, Antilles Episcopal Conference Pastoral Letter on Capital Punishment, para 16, n.15: "The death penalty is discriminatory and is often used disproportionately against the poor, minorities and members of social, ethnic and religious communities," Amnesty International, *The Death Penalty: Questions and Answers* (April 2000). The data provided by the Bureau of Justice statistics of the U.S. Department of Justice indicates disproportionality according to race and ethnicity in death sentencing. See the revised report (January 1999) at <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pubalp2.htm> Capital Punishment in Jamaica, the Report of the Research Team of the Frazer Commission (1979) observed: "In every country in the world, history shows that the death penalty has been unjustly imposed. It bears unevenly and irrevocably on the poor, on minorities, and on oppressed groups within the population. The above conclusion would certainly be true if the men presently on death row [in Jamaica] were executed" p. 57

[31] *Ibid*, para 16, n.16: Pope St John XXIII, Encyclical Letter *Mater et Magistra*, 1961, n. 20

[32] *Ibid*, Para 16, n17: Pope St John XXIII, Encyclical Letter *Pacem in terris*, 1963, n. 56

[33] *Ibid*, para 22

[34] Jubilee Year 2000, Antilles Episcopal Conference Pastoral Letter on Capital Punishment, para 22, n.21

[35] *Ibid*, para 22

[36] *Ibid*

[37] *Ibid*, para 23

[38] *Ibid*, Para 29, n.25: The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965, n. 75

[39] Jubilee Year 2000, Antilles Episcopal Conference Pastoral Letter on Capital Punishment, para 29, n.26: *World Synod of Catholic Bishops, Justice in the World*, 1971, n. 38

[40]Ibid, para 29

[41] Ibid, para 30, n.27: Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1994, n. 2266

[42] Ibid, para 30, n.28: Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 1995, n. 27

[43] Ibid, para 30, n. 29 Homily, Pope John Paul II, January 27, 1999, St. Louis, Missouri, U.S.A

[44] Jubilee Year 2000, Antilles Episcopal Conference Pastoral Letter on Capital Punishment, para 31

[45] Ibid, para 32

[46] Jubilee Year 2000, Antilles Episcopal Conference Pastoral Letter on Capital Punishment, para 33

[47] Pope St. John Paul II, "Let Us Celebrate Life!" USA -The Message of Justice, Peace, & Love, Boston, MA: St. Paul Editions, 1979, #3, 6; pp.278, 282.

[48] *The Gospel of Life (Evangelium Vitae)*, 99





Statement on CAPITAL PUNISHMENT by the Roman Catholic Bishops  
of the Antilles Episcopal Conference (AEC) in the Caribbean during  
the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy (Dec 8 2015 - Nov 20 2016)

# HUMAN LIFE IS GIFT FROM GOD



“The commandment ‘You shall not kill’ has absolute value and applies to both the innocent and the guilty... Today, the death penalty is inadmissible no matter how serious the crime of the offender. It is an offence to the inviolability of life and the dignity of the human person that contradicts God’s plan for man and society and His merciful justice...The death penalty does not do justice to the victims, but encourages revenge...Today, not only are there means to suppress crime effectively without recourse to the death penalty, but there is also a greater moral sensitivity regarding the value of human life. All Christians and people of good will are called on to work not only for the abolition of the death penalty, but also to improve prison conditions so that they respect the human dignity of people who have been deprived of their freedom...I appeal to the consciences of those who govern to reach an international consensus to abolish the death penalty”.

**Pope Francis**

# HUMAN LIFE IS GIFT FROM GOD

*"No-one can be excluded from the Mercy of God... Perhaps we have long since forgotten how to show and live the way of mercy... The temptation ... to focus exclusively on justice made us forget that this is only the first, albeit necessary and indispensable step.. The time has come for the Church to take up the joyful call to mercy once more."*

Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus* ("The Face of Mercy")



Archdiocese of Port of Spain  
[www.rcpos.org](http://www.rcpos.org)



Antilles Episcopal  
Conference

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