

Bishop George Leo Thomas  
Diocese of Helena  
**Senate Bill 306**  
A bill to abolish the death penalty  
In the State of Montana

My name is Bishop George Leo Thomas, and I am Bishop of the Roman Catholic diocese of Helena. This morning I am speaking on behalf of the Montana State Catholic Conference, which represents both the Diocese of Helena, and the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings, and the 140,000 Montana residents who identify themselves as Catholic.

Prior to my appointment as Bishop of Helena three years ago, I served in the Archdiocese of Seattle for twenty eight years. In addition to pastoral duties as priest and bishop, I was chaplain to a 1800 bed maximum security jail in downtown Seattle for a period of twelve years. I also served as chairman of the board for Catholic Community Services, the largest independent social services provider in the State of Washington.

These pastoral assignments accorded me regular and sustained contact with persons charged or convicted of crimes, along with their families, with legal and mental health professionals, with law enforcement and correction officials, and 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 mightily with the complex questions we are facing in our collective efforts to address responsibly and humanely the question of capital punishment in the State of Montana.

I have organized my brief remarks into three sections, beginning with an expression of solidarity with victims of crime and their families.

**(1) Solidarity with Victims of Crime and their Families**

Down through the years, I have listened to heart-breaking stories of individuals and families whose lives have been shattered at the hands of the violent criminal. I have ministered among those who have been robbed of their hopes and dreams, and whose sense of safety and security is gone forever. Except for other victims of violent crime, none of us can fully appreciate the anguish they have experienced, because we have not walked in their shoes.

The state has the pressing responsibility to help restore their security and reduce their vulnerability so that they may live day to day without the threat of force or fear. When addressing the question of capital punishment, our primary point of reference must be the victims of crime. We want to stand with them, minister among them, pray for their healing and sense of well being, particularly now when they are confronted with hearings and media inquiries that serve to reopen the wounds and losses of the past.

## **(2) Catholic Social Teaching**

Catholic Social Teaching holds that advances in modern technology have provided us with the means to ensure the safety of the community for the natural life of a convicted felon. Therefore we believe that cases where the death penalty could be used “are rare”, if not practically non-existent.” It is important for us to note that the State of Montana has this advanced security technology well in place.

As a Catholic Conference, we believe that a system of restorative justice is preferable to state sponsored homicide, which ultimately demeans all of us by advancing a moral disconnect that teaches killing is wrong, followed by the willful taking of another human life.

## **(3) A grave punishment**

Events preceding the execution of David Dawson offered new insights to those who underestimate the gravity of interminable confinement. Many of those condemned to prison for the duration of their natural life will tell us, as did David Dawson, that they are experiencing the life reserved for those who visit heinous crime upon society—a caged life of wretched sameness. Yet it is also possible for condemned inmates to use their time positively and profitably, and with the assistance of counseling and spiritual care, to express remorse and take personal responsibility for the crimes they have visited upon society.

We believe that a sentence short of the ultimate and irreversible punishment, provides both safety for the public and the opportunity for the restorative justice for the convicted. At the same time, we hold that for the sake of society at large, and for the well-being of crime victims, the sentence of life in prison without the possibility of parole should mean exactly what it says.

## **Conclusion:**

The Catholic Church in Montana State stands in support of **Senate Bill 306**, 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, helps restore the common good, provides opportunity for restorative justice, and breaks the tragic cycle of violence.

We ask you, the members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, to favor the higher ground provided by SB306, and to take the “road less traveled.”

I thank you for the opportunity to provide input on a bill that has potential to build a Culture of Life in the great State of Montana.