

**Joint Statement of the Roman Catholic Bishops of North Dakota and Minnesota
Opposing the Death Penalty in the Prosecution of Alfonso Rodriguez, Jr.**

June 2004

We, the Roman Catholic Bishops of North Dakota and Minnesota, respectfully encourage you to seek justice for Dru Sjodin, her family and friends, and the citizens of North Dakota and Minnesota, without resorting to the death penalty for Alfonso Rodriguez, Jr.

We are each keenly aware of the pain and suffering endured by both the victims of murder and the loved ones they leave behind. As Pastors, we have each ministered far too many times to the victims of violent crimes and their loved ones. We continue to mourn over the senseless abduction and tragic murder of Ms. Sjodin and offer our prayers and deepest sympathies to those she left behind. We must deepen our commitment to our brothers and sisters who have suffered needless violence in their lives and, by speaking out against the death penalty, we do not intend to diminish, in any way, their pain or loss. We are convinced, however, that we must all come together to hold people accountable for their actions within a system of justice that does not carry with it the element of vengeance.

The teachings of the Catholic Church are long-settled and unequivocal on the matter of the death penalty. Chapter 2267 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church dictates, in part, that because modern society has “non-lethal means” to protect itself and its people from those who have done harm, “authority will limit itself to such means, as these are more in keeping with the concrete conditions of the common good and more in conformity with the dignity of the human person.”

Throughout his papacy, our Holy Father Pope John Paul II, has advocated for the abolition of the death penalty. In his 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life), our Holy Father explained that:

The nature and extent of the punishment must be carefully evaluated and decided upon, and ought not to go to the extreme of executing the offender except in cases of absolute necessity; in other words, when it would not be possible otherwise to defend society. Today, however, as a result of steady improvements in the organization of the penal system, such cases are rare, if not practically non-existent.

During the last quarter century, our U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops has repeatedly called for the abolition of the death penalty across our nation and throughout the world. In November 1980, the U.S. Catholic Bishops issued their *Statement on Capital Punishment* in which the Bishops examined the important moral and religious issues involved in capital punishment and concluded by urging those who support the death penalty “to review the considerations we have offered which show both the evils

associated with capital punishment and the harmony of the abolition of capital punishment with the values of the Gospel.” In 1999, the Bishops reiterated and reemphasized their call for the abolition of the death penalty in their statement *A Good Friday Appeal to End the Death Penalty* and advised that “we must commit ourselves to a persistent and principled witness against the death penalty, against a culture of death, and for the Gospel of Life.”

Our opposition to the death penalty is a reflection of our consistent pro-life message of our Catholic faith as expressed through our principles of Catholic Social Teaching. This message, stated briefly, is that every life is sacred from conception through natural death because every human person is created in the image and likeness of God. Simply put, we don't pick which lives are sacred and which are not. As a community of believers, the Roman Catholic Church holds dear the concept of the dignity and value of every human life.

Our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, instructed us in a homily he delivered during his 1999 visit to St. Louis, Missouri -- a death penalty state -- that “The new evangelization calls for followers of Christ, who are unconditionally pro-life; who will proclaim, celebrate and serve the Gospel of life in every situation [to recognize that] the dignity of human life must never be taken away, even in the case of someone who has done great evil.”

We further oppose capital punishment not just for what it does to those guilty of horrible crimes, but also because of what it does to all of us as a society. We believe that an increasing reliance on the death penalty diminishes each of us and it is a sign of escalating disrespect for human life within our society. In addition, we are deeply concerned about the growing acceptance of revenge as a principle of justice which, we believe, requires us to examine whether or not the very violence that frightens us so much has made some of us proponents of violence.

We are firmly convinced that, as a society, we must seek justice through means that do not require the taking of another human life because we believe that violence should not be answered with violence and that we can not teach that killing is wrong by taking the lives of offenders.

While we acknowledge that the U.S. Department of Justice has the legal authority to prosecute Mr. Rodriguez in federal district court, we are concerned that an effort to seek the death penalty in this case would be disrespectful of the beliefs of the citizens of North Dakota and Minnesota because each state long-ago abolished the death penalty. We join with the citizens of North Dakota and Minnesota in calling for justice for Ms. Sjodin and for the just prosecution of Mr. Rodriguez. If he is found guilty, we support his incarceration in prison for the balance of his natural life. We do not, however, support bypassing the will of the citizens of, and the laws of, the states of North Dakota and Minnesota by imposition of a punishment that violates the public convictions of, and public policies of, both states.

We respectfully ask each of you to join with us in advancing the culture of life by not seeking the death penalty against Mr. Rodriguez.

The Roman Catholic Bishops of North Dakota:

Most Rev. Paul A. Zipfel
Bishop of Bismarck

Most Rev. Samuel J. Aquila
Bishop of Fargo

The Roman Catholic Bishops of Minnesota:

Most Rev. Harry J. Flynn
Archbishop of the Archdiocese of
St. Paul and Minneapolis

Most Rev. Victor Balke
Bishop of Crookston

Most Rev. Dennis M. Schnurr
Bishop of Duluth

Most Rev. John C. Nienstedt
Bishop of New Ulm

Most Rev. John F. Kinney
Bishop of St. Cloud

Most Rev. Bernard J. Harrington
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Most Rev. Frederick F. Campbell
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