

Testimony to the House Judiciary II – Criminal Law Committee
Senate Bill 3539 - Abolition of the Death Penalty
November 30, 2010

My name is Bob Gilligan. I am the Executive Director of the Catholic Conference of Illinois and the Public Policy Chair for the Illinois Conference of Churches.

In the Christian tradition, we have recently begun our celebration of Advent. We are reminded of God's mercy in sending to us his Son, Jesus, who was himself sentenced to death by his crucifixion. With this in mind, now is the time to end the death penalty and ensure that no innocent life may again be taken by voting YES on Senate Bill 3539.

With an imperfect justice system, there can be no guarantee that the death penalty will never again be imposed on an innocent life. Furthermore, society's need to protect itself no longer demands capital punishment. We can defend and protect society from dangerous offenders through natural life imprisonment without the possibility of parole. Continued use of the death penalty weakens respect for the sanctity of life in our society. We must be committed to the value and dignity of human life, from conception to natural death. With alternatives in Illinois, such as natural life sentences, recourse to execution is no longer necessary, and therefore, no longer morally justifiable.

The US Bishops have observed that our society is increasingly looking to violent measures to deal with some of our most difficult social problems. But violence is not the solution; it is the clearest sign of our failures. The death penalty only serves to perpetuate the cycle of violence in our society. If we are truly a civilized society, we can find humane and effective alternatives to the death penalty.

We have all been created in God's image and every life is to be respected. Those who inflict harm and commit crimes are to be held accountable. Yet we must also understand that human dignity is a gift of God and respect for life applies to all. It is an illusion to believe that we can protect life by taking life. As the U.S. Bishops have stated, "reliance on the death penalty diminishes us and is a sign of growing disrespect for human life," and "its use ought to be abandoned not only for what it does to those who are executed, but what it does to us as a society."

Furthermore, the families and loved ones of victims require our compassion and support, and we must help them heal. Senate Bill 3539 also provides support for much needed services to victims' families. Please vote YES on Senate Bill 3539.