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Ending Juvenile Life Sentence without Parole in Illinois

A series of recent Supreme Court rulings state that sentencing juveniles to life in prison without possibility of parole is a form of cruel and unusual punishment. Such sentences violate the Eighth Amendment, the Court said, rendering them unconstitutional. As a result, state governments must now make fundamental changes to their sentencing laws.

Legislation has been introduced in both chambers of the Illinois General Assembly that will allow Illinois judges to consider age, role in the crime, or other mitigating factors before sentencing a youth to prison. House Bill 1348 and Senate Bill 1858 would amend state statute to ensure the circumstances of each person in each case are judged individually, as the Supreme Court instructs.

What the legislation also provides is a mechanism for objective, periodic review for those currently serving juvenile life without parole. This review process will allow for meaningful participation from victims and families whose voices, feelings and rights must be heard, appreciated and respected.

The proposed legislation melds well with Catholic social philosophy, which teaches that there is little justification for sentencing a juvenile to life imprisonment without possibility of parole. Research confirms what every family knows: the intellects of juveniles are not fully developed. Children grow up, mature and show better judgment.

We believe that a young person who commits even a terrible crime has some capacity to repent and rehabilitate. We must find a way to punish young offenders without forever closing the doors on the chance for a rehabilitated life outside prison.

Some individuals who commit serious, violent crimes will not rehabilitate, not repent and not become fit for release. In these cases, lengthy sentences will be carried out. We simply ask that our laws allow for the capacity of our fellow man – especially our children – to repent and rehabilitate.

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