



# AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

## General Secretariat

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Ms Vikki Darrough  
Inquiry Secretary  
Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade  
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Dear Ms Darrough

**Further information for the Inquiry on Australia's Advocacy for Abolition of the Death Penalty**

I appreciate the Committee Secretariat sending me in January the transcript of the hearings into Australia's Advocacy for Abolition of the Death Penalty. I took a number of questions on notice when I appeared before the Committee on Friday, 27 November, so I am writing to provide information to answer those questions.

**1. Are there states where Catholics are in the majority that retain the death penalty, particularly in South America?**

There are 44 countries that have a majority of Catholics in their population. These countries are Vatican City, East Timor, Malta, San Marino, Andorra, Paraguay, Poland, Croatia, Seychelles, Ireland, Italy, Monaco, Mexico, Portugal, Equatorial Guinea, Philippines, Cabo Verde, Lithuania, Bolivia, Peru, Liechtenstein, Colombia, Ecuador, Sao Tome and Principe, Venezuela, Argentina, Panama, Spain, Luxembourg, Burundi, Costa Rica, Slovakia, Saint Lucia, Brazil, Austria, Dominica, Belgium, Dominican Republic, Kiribati, Chile, Haiti, France, Slovenia, Cuba (see: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catholic\\_Church\\_by\\_country](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catholic_Church_by_country) ).

Of those 44 countries, 37 are classified by Amnesty International as “Abolitionist for all Crimes” in relation to the death penalty. Of the remainder, four are classified as “Retentionist”: Equatorial Guinea, Saint Lucia, Dominica and Cuba. Three are classified as “Abolitionist for Ordinary Crimes Only”: Peru, Brazil and Chile.

Of the 12 sovereign states in South America, 10 are majority Catholic: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela. Three of the 10 countries are classified as “Abolitionist for Ordinary Crimes Only”: Peru, Brazil and Chile (see: Amnesty International, “Death Sentences and Executions 2014”. Amnesty International, London, 2015.)

## **2. Did the Catholic Church in the Philippines have a role in convincing that country to abolish the death penalty?**

Media reports from the time attribute President Gloria Arroyo’s move to abolish the death penalty in 2006 to significant pressure from the Catholic Church.

## **3. How is the Year of Mercy being rolled out?**

The Year of Mercy was called by Pope Francis to encourage all people to contemplate and act on the mystery of God’s mercy.

Bishops in each of the 28 dioceses and five eparchies in Australia are responsible for organizing their own implementation of the Year of Mercy in their own diocese. The National Office for Evangelisation is a clearing house for the Year of Mercy celebrations in Australia.

Dioceses have established a Door of Mercy at their Cathedrals and in some cases at churches in other centres. Holy doors are a ritual to symbolize conversion, as pilgrims pass through them, leaving the past behind. Pilgrims who pass through a Door of Mercy are leaving sin behind and entering the mercy of Christ.

Earlier this year Pope Francis published a new book called “The Name of God is Mercy”. The Pope explains that mercy is when we open our hearts to human “wretchedness” and “the more conscious we are of our wretchedness and our sins ... the more we experience the love and infinite mercy of God among us, and the more capable we are of looking upon the many ‘wounded’ we meet along the way with acceptance and mercy.”

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Public Policy Office has raised with the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council the possibility of issuing a new guide for Catholics on the Church’s teaching with regard to the death penalty during the Year of Mercy. The guide could include advice on practical action Catholics can take to help end the death penalty around the world. This may be issued to coincide with the 14<sup>th</sup> International Day Against the Death Penalty, on 10 October.

**4. In terms of the curricula of Catholic schools, is there any aspect that includes discussion with children about the death penalty?**

Each of the 28 dioceses runs its own school system, so Catholic education varies from place to place. Many systems have studies of the sanctity of human life in their religious education curricula. The decision on the specific life issues is made more at the school or teacher level and can depend on whether an issue is topical. For example, when Andrew Chan and Myuran Sukumaran were facing execution and were regularly in the news it is likely many more classes examined the issue of the death penalty.

Brisbane Catholic Education lists capital punishment as a possible topic in the alignment of its senior religion curriculum with the Queensland Studies Authority Study of Religion syllabus. The Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn lists it in the Year 10 program.

A number of school systems have resources that enable schools to cover this topic as part of teaching Catholic ethics. For example, the Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne's Catholic Education Office has an online resource to help students consider capital punishment as part of the ethics curriculum. A number of Catholic school systems, including Melbourne and Sydney also use the book "Catholic Ethical Thinking for Senior Secondary Students". This book includes the following chapters:

- A challenge to the culture of life: capital punishment
- The Catholic perspective on capital punishment, and
- The death penalty: case study of the Oklahoma bomber.

**5. Has there been any effort to work with other religions and other denominations in relation to the death penalty issue, in Australia or elsewhere? Has this been a part of interfaith dialogues as to how the church might provide leadership in these areas?**

On 8 February 2015 the Archbishop of Sydney, the most Rev Anthony Fisher OP and the Grand Mufti of Australia, Dr Ibrahim Abu Mohammed met to publicly plea for mercy for Andrew Chan and Myuran Sukumaran who were facing execution by firing squad.

Interfaith dialogues tend to confine their focus to national rather than international issues given discussion of international issues, particularly issues like conflicts in the Middle East, can promote division rather than harmony.

**6. Do you know if talking about the death penalty would be something that His Holiness might consider doing with other religious leaders?**

On 17 January this year Pope Francis visited Rome's Great Synagogue and in his speech called for respect for human life:

"Life is sacred, a gift of God. The fifth commandment of the Decalogue says: "Thou shalt not kill" (Exodus 20:13). God is the God of life, and always wants to promote and defend it; and we, created in his image and likeness, are called

upon to do the same. Every human being, as a creature of God, is our brother, regardless of his or her origin or religious affiliation. Each person must be viewed with favour, just as God does, who offers his merciful hand to all, regardless of their faith and of their belonging, and who cares for those who most need him: the poor, the sick, the marginalized, the helpless. Where life is in danger, we are called even more to protect it. Neither violence nor death will have the last word before God, the God of love and life. We must pray with insistence to help us put into practice the logic of peace, of reconciliation, of forgiveness, of life, in Europe, in the Holy Land, in the Middle East, in Africa and elsewhere in the world."

I hope that the Committee finds this extra information useful.

Yours sincerely

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