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PAPAL ENCYCLICAL A CLEAR AND IMPORTANT STEP FORWARD ON DEATH PENALTY ISSUE

Amnesty International welcomed references in the Pope's encyclical on life issued last week that substantially support the non-use of the death penalty.

"This is a clear and important step forward by the Catholic church on this question, reflecting the growing opinion within the church and in civil society that state executions are a violation of human rights," Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International noted that the encyclical made public on 30 March was in line with the current practice in the Vatican where the Pope frequently intercedes with state authorities in an effort to prevent imminent executions.

In the 56th paragraph of the document Evangelium Vitae, or The Gospel of Life, the Pope expresses strong reservations about the use of the death penalty, although he does not exclude it entirely.

The Pope notes that in society, as well as in the church, there exists "a growing tendency to demand that [the death penalty] be applied in a very limited way or even that it be abolished completely."

Later in that same paragraph, the Pope states that the death penalty should not be used "except in cases of absolute necessity: in other words, when it would not be possible otherwise to defend society." He affirms that such situations are becoming less and less likely: "Today... such cases are very rare, if practically non-existent."

Earlier in the encyclical the Pope also refers positively to the abolition of the death penalty, Amnesty International noted. In paragraph 27, when speaking about the "signs of hope" in today's world, he cites "growing public opposition to the death penalty, even when such a penalty is seen as a kind of 'legitimate defence' on the part of society."

The Pope goes on to state: "Modern society in fact has the means of effectively suppressing crime by rendering criminals harmless without definitively denying them the chance to reform."

The grounds on which the death penalty may be applied as stated in the encyclical are clearly more restrictive than in the Catechism of the Catholic Church issued in December 1992, which stated that public authority

must limit itself to "bloodless means" to protect "public order and the safety of persons", if such means are available.

At a press conference presenting the encyclical at the Vatican on 30 March, Cardinal Josef Ratzinger, Prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, said that the Catechism would be revised in relation to the death penalty in light of the encyclical.

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