



## Testimony on HB 682

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Andrew D. Rivas, J.D.  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Good morning Mr. Chairman, my name is Andrew Rivas and I am the executive director of the Texas Catholic Conference. The TCC is the statewide association of the 15 Roman Catholic dioceses in our state and it is our responsibility to advocate the public policy positions of all the dioceses and the twenty-seven Bishops of Texas.

First, let me begin by thanking you Mr. Chairman and all of the members of the Subcommittee for allowing me to testify before you today that the TCC supports HB 682. As many of you know, for more than a quarter of a century, the Bishops of Texas and the United States have advocated that states and the federal government restrain or end the use of the death penalty. Catholic teaching on the death penalty is clearly articulated in the encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, otherwise known as *The Gospel of Life*. It is also explained in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*.

According to our teaching the state has the recourse to impose the death penalty upon criminals convicted of murdering others if this ultimate sanction is the only available means to protect society from a grave threat to human life. However, our teaching goes on to say that this right of the state should not be exercised when other ways are available to punish criminals and to protect society that are more respectful of human life.

As **a community of faith**, we share the justified anger and revulsion at terrible and deadly crimes. In calling for an end to the use of the death penalty, we do not seek to diminish in any way the evil and harm caused by people who commit murder. We also share the hurt and horror, the loss and heartache that are the result of unspeakable acts of violence. Our Bishops and priests have presided at the funerals of police officers killed in the line of duty and have

consoled parents who have lost children. Our network of pastoral ministers has heard the anger and despair of victims' families who feel ignored by the criminal justice system, society as a whole, and, at times, even the Church. Our family of faith must care for sisters and brothers who have been wounded by violence and support them in their loss and search for justice. They deserve our compassion, solidarity, and support. However, standing with families of victims does not compel us to support the use of the death penalty. Often, these families of victims are further violated by the legal processes and public attention that are associated with capital punishment. For many left behind, a death sentence offers the illusion of closure and vindication. No act, not even an execution, can bring back a loved one or heal terrible wounds. The pain and loss of one death cannot be wiped away by another death.

Now, I have presented the Bishops' teaching regarding the use of the death penalty on many different occasions all across our country and in many different forums and the most common response I have received from supporters of capital punishment is that there are some crimes so heinous and some acts so foul that we as a society have to respond by taking the life of that guilty person. However, for our faith community, this issue—like all life issues—is more than public policy. It involves our faith and the central principle that human life is sacred. When the state, in our names and with our taxes, ends a human life despite having non-lethal alternatives, it suggests that society can overcome violence with violence. At a time when the sanctity of life is threatened in so many ways, taking life is not really a solution but may instead effectively undermine our society's respect for life. In many ways the death penalty is about us: the actions taken in our name, the values which guide our lives, and the dignity that we accord to human life. Public policies that treat some lives as unworthy of protection, or that are perceived as vengeful, fracture the moral conviction that human life is sacred.

In 1997 the Bishops of the state of Texas publicly declared that it was time to turn away from a deeply flawed system of state-sponsored executions to a way of protecting society and holding accountable the guilty in a way that reflects our society's best values. Today, twelve years later, the Bishops wish to take that

declaration even further by invoking the words of Pope John Paul II. In his encyclical *The Gospel of Life*, our late Holy Father told us that our God is the God of life and if we truly believe in his salvation then we have an “inescapable responsibility of *choosing to be unconditionally pro-life*.” Mr. Chairman, thank you again for allowing me to speak to your Subcommittee today. If you have any questions about anything I have said I am prepared to answer them at this time.