

A Plea to Amnesty International Members

A Statement of the President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

Bishop William S. Skylstad, Bishop of Spokane

July 2, 2007

It is deeply disappointing that the Executive Council of Amnesty International (AI) recently abandoned Amnesty International's neutral stance on abortion to take a pro-abortion position. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has been among those urging Amnesty to reject this proposed change when its International Council meets in August; however, action by Amnesty's Executive Council in April 2007 preempted this process. I call upon the members of Amnesty's International Council to reverse this decision.

The action of the Executive Council undermines Amnesty's longstanding moral credibility, diverts its mission, divides its own members (many of whom are Catholic or defend the rights of unborn children), and jeopardizes Amnesty's support by people in many nations, cultures and religions. As Cardinal Renato Martino, president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, recently said, "if in fact Amnesty International persists in this course of action, individuals and Catholic organizations must withdraw their support, because, in deciding to promote abortion rights, AI has betrayed its mission."

For many years, the Catholic community in the United States and elsewhere has admired and worked with Amnesty International in its efforts to advance the cause of universal human rights. Founded by a Catholic layman, Peter Benenson, Amnesty International has been a beacon of hope to thousands of prisoners of conscience and victims of abuse and torture. In this regard AI has been a source of inspiration to millions of supporters, including the many Catholics who are members. Much more urgent work remains, work which we believe will be harmed by this unprecedented and unnecessary involvement in the abortion debate.

While the proposed action by Amnesty International may appear to some to support women's freedom or provide a compassionate response to women in difficult situations of pregnancy, abortion injures the health and dignity of women at the same time that it ends the life of the unborn child. A far more compassionate response is to provide support and services for pregnant women, advance their educational and economic standing in society, and resist all forms of violence and stigmatization against them. The Catholic Church provides these services to many women around the world and commits itself to continuing to do so.

Based on this commitment to women, the Church does not object to AI's stand against criminal penalties for women who have undergone abortion. In fact, the Catholic Church has long held that these women need compassion and healing, not punishment. However, AI's policy also exempts abortion practitioners from meaningful penalties and thereby trivializes the harm done by abortion. AI's new policy appears to apply to every stage of pregnancy and has already led AI-USA to oppose laws against the killing of partially-delivered children. Similarly, the policy of advancing access to abortion to preserve women's "health," a word left undefined by AI, has not confined the practice to narrow circumstances, but in American law has led to abortion on demand.

I urge the members of the International Council of Amnesty International, when they meet in Mexico in August, to reconsider and rescind this new policy. It is never too late to seek justice for all vulnerable and oppressed members of the human family.