



Memphis Diocese | Nashville Diocese | Knoxville Diocese

February 5, 2020

Dear Governor Lee,

We, the bishops of the three Catholic dioceses of Tennessee, urge you to exercise the authority of your office to stop the execution of Nick Sutton scheduled to die in the electric chair on February 20.

Nick Sutton was convicted and sentenced to life in prison for killing three people before he was 20 years old: John Large, Charles Almon, and his own grandmother, Dorothy Sutton. He received a death sentence several years later for killing a fellow inmate, Carl Estep. Despite the horrible crimes he committed as a young man, those who know Mr. Sutton say he has thoroughly changed and is remorseful for the pain and suffering that he caused. Tony Eden, a former corrections officer in Tennessee state prisons, has recently spoken out about how Mr. Sutton saved his life during a prison riot.

Beyond the specific facts of this case, we clearly state our strong opposition to the state carrying out the death penalty. Nationally, we have seen many people released from death row after they have been found to have been innocent of the crime for which they were convicted. Based on a human system as it is, there is always the chance that the state executes an innocent person. Even when guilt is certain, the execution is not necessary to protect society.

In 1999, Bishop Stika, as a priest in the Archdiocese of St. Louis, met Pope John Paul II (now Saint John Paul) and saw first-hand, his role in commuting the death sentence of Missouri's Darrell Mease to life in prison. At that time, ***the pope called for the end to the death penalty as both cruel and unnecessary.*** He said that it is simply not necessary as the only means to protect society while still providing a just punishment for those who break civil laws. ***Rather than serving as a path to justice, the death penalty contributes to the growing disrespect for human life and continues a cycle of violence in society.***

We would be happy to provide written documentation about the Catholic Church's position on capital punishment or discuss in detail the foundations on which that teaching is based. We welcome any questions that you might have about our teaching, as we join with many other religious denominations in firm opposition to the execution of even those convicted of heinous crimes.

We share in the recognition and celebration of redemption through Jesus Christ's victory over sin and death.

Please know that you remain in our prayers in your service to the people of Tennessee.

Sincerely in Christ

Most Reverend Richard F. Stika
Bishop of Knoxville

Most Reverend J. Mark Spalding
Bishop of Nashville

Most Reverend David P. Talley
Bishop of Memphis