

New Jersey repeals capital punishment: Eight death sentences commuted

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New Jersey became the first state in decades to repeal the death penalty as Governor Jon S. Corzine signed a measure to end what he called “state-endorsed killing.”

The state had reestablished capital punishment in 1982, but no executions had taken place. In addition to signing the bill December 17, Corzine commuted the sentences of eight men on New Jersey’s death row to life imprisonment without chance of parole—now the maximum penalty.

The New Jersey Senate passed the bill December 10. Three days later, after more than two hours of emotional debate about justice and retribution, the state’s Assembly gave final approval, 44-36.

“It is simply not for us to decide who should live and who should die,” said Assembly speaker Joseph Roberts, a Democrat. “Murderers have not been deterred in the 2,000 years the death penalty has been in effect,” said Assembly member Reed Gusciora, a Democrat.

The lawmakers who opposed the bill told of the brutal murders of children, women and police officers and argued that some criminals simply deserve to die. “There are some crimes that are just so heinous that society demands the death penalty,” said Assembly member Sam Thompson, a Republican.

The state Death Penalty Study Commission, which completed a study of all aspects of the death penalty in New Jersey last January, concluded in part that whatever good might be served by executing a small number of guilty persons would not justify the risk of executing an innocent one.

“I believe society first must determine if its endorsement of violence begets violence, and if violence undermines our commitment to the sanctity of life,” Corzine said after signing the bill. “To these questions, I answer yes.”

In Rome, golden light shone through the Colosseum for 24 hours on December 18 in celebration of New Jersey’s abolishment of the death penalty. Officials of the Italian capital had agreed with the Catholic lay Community of Sant’Egidio, which advocates for ending the death penalty, to bathe in gold light the site of executions and gladiator contests during the Roman Empire.

The special lighting has become a symbol in campaigns against capital punishment. The switch from regular white lighting to gold has been done about 20 times since 1999, and was done in November after a UN committee approved a nonbinding resolution urging a worldwide moratorium on executions. It occurred also in 2003 when then Illinois governor George Ryan commuted all death sentences in that state. -*Religion News Service*