Statement Opposing California's Proposition 209

California Catholic Conference of Bishops

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STATEMENT OPPOSING CALIFORNIA'S PROPOSITION 209

CALIFORNIA CATHOLIC CONFERENCE OF BISHOPS

When he visited our nation in 1995 Pope John Paul II declared, "The basic question before a democratic society is how ought we to live together." This question has particular urgency for California in 1996, when our November ballot asks the citizens of our state to vote on Proposition 209, which would remove affirmative action as a policy option for redressing the effects of years of past discrimination in our society.

As the California Catholic Conference of Bishops we ask our Catholic people, and all people of good will, to stand in solidarity with us, and with our many brothers and sisters who still bear the marks of past discrimination and disadvantage, in rejecting Proposition 209 as bad public policy for our state and for American society.

Affirmative action measures were begun in 1965 in an attempt to create a "level playing-field" for those whose opportunities for equal education and jobs were still unequal 100 years after the Emancipation Proclamation—in the case of minorities due to past discrimination, and in the case of women due largely to past social customs. Affirmative measures have typically included recruitment of minorities and women, remedial education, job-training programs, flexible hiring goals, and timetables for promotion. Properly understood and implemented, affirmative action does not require quotas or hiring unqualified persons. Legislative and judicial remedies should continue to correct inequities and exclude bias or reverse discrimination in their application.

It is not realistic for California voters to think that these past inequities do not still need the benefit of affirmative action programs, as if the effects of past discrimination in educational and job opportunities no longer existed. It is as necessary today as it was in 1965 to work to lessen the effects of past discrimination and prevent its future occurrence by promoting social solidarity. This we see to be the purpose and benefit of affirmative action.

In our 1986 pastoral letter, Economic Justice for All, we bishops of the United States wrote: "Judiciously administered affirmative programs in education and employment can be important
expressions of the drive for solidarity and participation that is at the heart of true justice. Social harm calls for social relief."

The issue at hand in Proposition 209 is fundamentally a question of justice, of the dignity which is owed to every human person regardless of race or gender. Affirmative action has proved to be one practical way to work toward the guarantee of justice and human dignity, and to overcome discrimination past and present. Proposition 209 would remove this important tool for justice. It should be defeated on November 5.