



Catholic Mobilizing Network

To End the Use of the Death Penalty

What Every Catholic Should Know About the Death Penalty

Scripture and the Death Penalty

In *A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death*, the bishops explain the scriptural roots of Catholic teaching on the death penalty. This begins with the story of creation, which teaches that every life is a precious gift from God (see Gn 2:7, 21-23). This gift must be respected and protected. We are created in God's image and redeemed by Jesus Christ, who himself was crucified."

"Mercy is the Lord's most powerful message. It is not easy to trust oneself to the mercy of God, because his mercy is an unfathomable abyss. But we must do it!"

— Pope Francis, *First Statement as Pope*, March 2013

The bishops also explain, "some argue that biblical statements about 'life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth' (see Ex 21:23-25, Lv 24:17, Dt 19:21) require that the death penalty be used for certain crimes. A correct interpretation of these passages indicates, however, that the principal intent of such laws was to limit the retribution that could be exacted for an offense, not to require a minimum punishment. Furthermore, it is important to read individual passages in the context of Sacred Scripture as a whole. While the Old Testament includes some passages about taking the life of one who kills, the Old Testament and the teaching of Christ in the New Testament call us to protect life, practice mercy, and reject vengeance."

From a Victim's Family

"By the time Shannon's murderer was captured four years later, we had learned that pursuing the death penalty would not be the way we would want to honor our daughter's life, nor would that decision have helped us deal with the painful reminders of her unfulfilled hopes and dreams... Facing the reality of her death made us realize that the sacredness of life was not an abstract concept. Ultimately we concluded that if we couldn't stand by our principles when it was excruciatingly difficult, then they were not our principles at all. We took the stand to oppose the use of capital punishment for our daughter's murder."

— Vicki Schieber, mother of murdered daughter, Shannon; founder, *Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights*

Catholic Teaching and the Death Penalty

"I draw the attention of society's leaders to the need to make every effort to eliminate the death penalty and to reform the penal system in a way that ensures respect for the prisoners' human dignity."

— Pope Benedict XVI, *Benin*, November 2011

Catholic teaching offers a unique perspective on crime and punishment. It affirms our commitment to comfort and support victims and their families, while acknowledging the God-given dignity of every human life, even those who do great harm.

Catholic teaching on human life is rooted in the belief that all life is a gift from God that must be respected and defended from conception to natural death. In his encyclical *The Gospel of Life*, the Holy Father challenges followers of Christ to be "unconditionally pro life." He reminds us, "The dignity of human life must never be taken away, even in the case of someone who has done great evil. Modern society has the means of protecting itself, without definitively denying criminals the chance to reform" (*Gospel of Life*, 27).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains, "the traditional teaching of the Church does not exclude recourse to the death penalty, if this is the only possible way of effectively defending human lives against the unjust aggressor. If, however, non-lethal means are sufficient to defend and protect people's safety from the aggressor, authority will limit itself to such means" (CCC, 2267). The test of whether the death penalty can be used is not the gravity of the offense, but whether it is absolutely necessary to protect society. The *Catechism* adds that today "the cases in which the execution of the offender is an absolute necessity 'are very rare, if not practically non-existent'" (CCC, 2267).

The Catholic bishops of the United States have spoken out clearly and strongly against the use of the death penalty. In 1999 they issued *A Good Friday Appeal to End the Death Penalty*. They explained that their opposition to the death penalty is based on more than concern for "what it does to those guilty of horrible crimes but for what it does to all of us as a society." In 2005 they issued *A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death*. They acknowledged that sentences such as "life in prison without parole" provide non-lethal alternatives and called for an end to the use of the death penalty in the United States, stating "it is time for our nation to abandon the illusion that we can protect life by taking life."

Facts About the Death Penalty

From the Death Penalty Information Center

Who Is Affected?

Approximately 3,108 inmates are on death row in 37 state, military and federal prisons. Since 1976, there have been a total of 1,352 executions in the United States, including 43 in 2011 and also 43 in 2012, and 32 as of November 2013. But the impact of the death penalty goes well beyond those on death row. It also impacts the families of inmates as well as the families of victims. To date, 18 states have repealed the penalty: AK, CT, HI, IL, IO, ME, MD, MA, MI, MN, NJ, NM, NY, ND, RI, VT, WV, WI and DC.

Misspent Millions

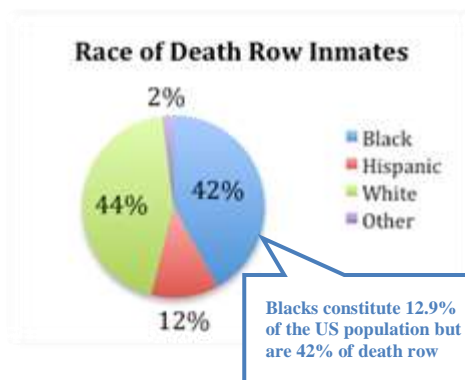
Citizens of 32 states are implicated in the death penalty through their tax dollars. Studies in state after state have shown that the death penalty is more costly than alternative sentences. For example, the California death penalty system costs taxpayers \$118.5 million per year over and above the costs of keeping convicts locked up for life (*California Commission on the Fair Administration of Justice*, Pg 117).

Innocent Lives in the Balance

Human beings run the criminal justice system—and we make mistakes. 143 people from 26 states have been exonerated from death row after finding evidence of their innocence. Rather than showing that the system is working, exonerations provide evidence that our system is flawed. DNA testing cannot solve these problems. DNA evidence exists in only 10% of criminal cases.

Is the Justice System Just?

- Over 90% of those on death row across the country were too poor to afford their own attorney.
- Studies by states across the country show that geography plays a role in who lives and dies. A similar murder might get death in one county but not in a nearby county.
- Over 80% of those executed in the U.S. were convicted of killing a white person, even though African Americans are the victims in at least half of all homicides (*Death Row USA*, NAACP Legal Defense Fund)



What You Can Do

- **Pray** for victims of crime and their families, those who have been wrongly convicted, and those awaiting execution.
- **Learn** about Catholic social teaching, U.S. criminal justice policies, and the policies in your state. Go to the web site listed below for more information about the death penalty.
- **Educate** people in your parish or community about Catholic social teaching and the criminal justice system. Visit the web site listed below for Vatican and U.S. bishops' statements on the death penalty as well as statements from individual bishops and states Catholic Conferences.
- **Advocate** by contacting your elected officials. Discuss Catholic teaching on the death penalty and what steps could be taken at the state and national level to curtail or end its use.



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