

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.”

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...

“No one in our family ever wanted to see the killer of our brother and his wife put to death. We felt instinctively that vengeance wouldn’t alleviate our grief. We wanted this murderer in prison so he could never hurt another person. But wishing he would suffer and die would only have diminished us and shriveled our own souls. Hatred doesn’t heal. Every time the state kills a person, human society moves in the direction of its lowest, most base urges. We don’t have to make that choice. Our lawmakers have the capacity to help us abolish the death penalty and along with it, the fantasy that it will make the pain go away.”

—Mary Bosco Van Valkenburg, whose brother and sister-in-law were murdered

Catholic Teaching and the Death Penalty

Catholic teaching offers a unique perspective on crime and punishment. It begins with the recognition that the dignity of the human person applies to both victims and offenders. 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

I renew the appeal I made most recently at Christmas for a consensus to end the death penalty, which is both cruel and unnecessary . . .

*Pope John Paul II,
St. Louis, Missouri, January 27, 1999*

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 that “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 that “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 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.”

Ending the death penalty would be one important step away from a culture of death and toward building a culture of life.

United States Catholic Bishops, 2005 A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death

Facts About the Death Penalty

Who Is Affected?

Approximately 3300 inmates are on death row in 35 state, military, and federal prisons. Since 1976, there have been 1138 executions in the United States, including four in 2009. 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. Moreover, citizens of 36 states are implicated in the death penalty through their tax dollars.

Misspent Millions

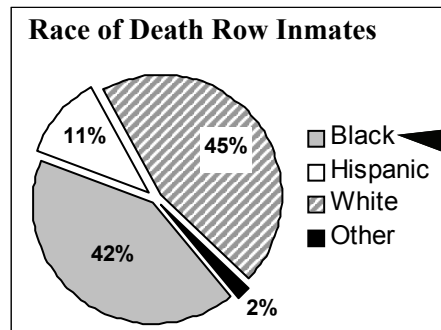
Studies in state after state have shown that the death penalty is more costly than alternative sentences. For example, the California death penalty system costs taxpayers \$114 million per year over and above the costs of keeping convicts locked up for life (*L.A. Times*, March 6, 2005).

Innocent Lives in the Balance

The criminal justice system is run by human beings—and we make mistakes. At least 130 people from 26 states have been exonerated from death row after evidence of innocence was found. Rather than showing the system is working, exonerations provide evidence that our system is flawed. DNA testing cannot solve these problems. DNA evidence exists in only 10 percent of criminal cases.

Is the Justice System Just?

- Over 90 percent of those on death row across the country were too poor to afford their own attorney.
- Studies by states across the country show geography plays a role in who lives and dies. Similar murders might get death in one county, but not in one nearby.
- Over 80 percent of those executed in the United States 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).



Blacks constitute 12.9% of the US population, but 42% of death row inmates

Source: *Death Penalty Information Center*

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 state 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.

To receive information regarding the Catholic Church's work on the death penalty at the national level, or to link with a particular state's efforts, visit the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Web site at usccb.org/deathpenalty.

Join the Catholic Mobilizing Network for the Catholic Campaign to End the Use of the Death Penalty to receive regular updates and information on what you can do to bring an end to the use of the death penalty in the U.S. Go to www.catholicmobilizing.org for more information.