

death penalty

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

WHAT EVERY CATHOLIC SHOULD KNOW ABOUT CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

In these modern times, there has been a serious re-examination of the death penalty—its fairness and effectiveness, its moral and social dimensions. Catholic teaching on the death penalty begins with the recognition that the dignity of the human person applies to everyone. It affirms our commitment to comfort and support victims and their families, to protect citizens, while acknowledging the God-given dignity of every human life, even those who do great harm. Respect for truly innocent human life can be enhanced by respecting the essential worth of people convicted of capital crimes. Every refusal to kill affirms the dignity of all human life.

Scripture

Catholic teaching on human life is rooted in the belief that all life is a gift from God (See Gn 2:7, 21-21). It must be respected and defended from conception to natural death. In *A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death*, the bishops of the United States stated that “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.” The bishops explained that the biblical “intent of such laws was to limit the retribution that could be exacted for an offense, not to require a minimum punishment.” They also said that it is important to read individual passages in the context of Sacred Scripture as a whole, and the Old Testament and the teaching of Christ in the New Testament “call us to protect life, practice mercy, and reject vengeance.” USCCB, *A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death*, 2005.

The Catechism

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states 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 nonexistent’” (CCC, 2267). As the bishops of the United States have said, “sentences such as life in prison without parole provide non-lethal alternatives” to the death penalty and render unnecessary the use of the death penalty in the United States. USCCB, *A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death*, 2005.

The Teachings of Pope John Paul II

Under the leadership and merciful example of Pope John Paul II, Catholic teaching on the death penalty has been articulated and applied with even greater clarity and strength. Through his powerful encyclical, the *Gospel of Life (Evangelium Vitae)*, the Holy Father challenged followers of Christ to be “unconditionally pro life.” He reminded 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)

death penalty facts¹

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Deterrence

According to a survey of the former and present presidents of the country's top academic criminological societies, 88% of these experts reject the notion that the death penalty acts as a deterrent to murder. (Radelet & Lacock, 2009)

Consistent with previous years, the 2008 FBI Uniform Crime Report showed that the South had the highest murder rate. The South accounts for over 80% of executions. The Northeast, which has less than 1% of all executions, had the lowest murder rate.

A 2009 poll commissioned by the Death Penalty Information Center found police chiefs ranked the death penalty last among ways to reduce violent crime. The police chiefs also considered the death penalty the least efficient use of taxpayers' money.

Studies show that the death penalty does not have a demonstrated deterrent effect on reducing violent crime within prisons against either inmates or prison guards.

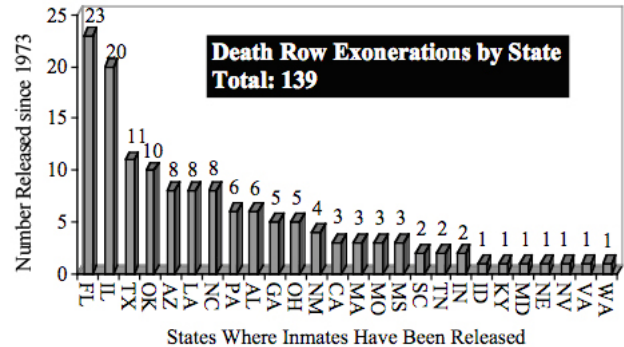
Financial Costs

Studies 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 above the cost of keeping convicts locked up for life. DPIC, 2009.

Typically, the State of New Hampshire pays between \$70,000-\$100,000 in public defender costs for first degree murder cases. In contrast, in 2008 the state spent approximately \$1.2 million for a public defender for one capital murder case. The state spent a total more than \$5.3 million on two capital cases in 2008. DPIC, 2009.

Innocence

Since 1973, over 140 people have been released from death row with evidence of their innocence (Staff Report, House Judiciary Subcommittee on Civil and Constitutional Rights, October 1993, with updates from DPIC).



As of November 3, 2009, there have been 139 exonerations in 26 different States.

Murder Victims' Families

The organization, Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights, opposes the death penalty because, among other reasons, the death penalty process "is fraught with error;" it "wastes money" that "should be used for effective crime prevention measures and victim services;" and "does nothing to serve victims' family members." (www.mvfh.org)

Sources of Information

www.usccb.org/deathpenalty

www.catholicnh.org/deathpenalty

www.catholicmobilizing.org

¹Information obtained from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops; Death Penalty Information Center (DPIC); DPIC Fact Sheet (updated Dec. 2, 2009): www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/documents/FactSheet.pdf.