

# CATHOLIC CAMPAIGN TO END THE USE OF THE DEATH PENALTY

**It is time for U.S. Catholics to come together to work  
to end the use of the death penalty in our land.**

## Why a Campaign Now?

- Pope John Paul II and the bishops have clearly asked us to act to end the use of the death penalty.
- Catholic teaching, as expressed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and other statements of the Vatican and the bishops, makes clear that the use of the death penalty cannot be justified when the state has other ways to protect society.
- The death penalty in our land is deeply flawed. More than 115 people on death row have been exonerated. The death penalty is unfairly applied due to many factors, including where a crime is committed, the race of the victim and offender, and the quality and costs of defense.
- Catholics are re-examining and changing their minds about the use of the death penalty. Less than half of all Catholics now support the use of the death penalty, down substantially from past years.
- The death penalty diminishes all of us. Its use ought to be abandoned not only for what it does to those who are executed, but what it does to us as a society. We cannot teach respect for life by taking life.

## Facts About the Death Penalty

- Approximately 3,500 inmates are on death row in 38 state, federal, and military prisons. The largest number, over 600, is in California.
- Since 1973, there have been more than 115 exonerations of death row inmates.
- Recent Supreme Court decisions have limited the use of the death penalty by declaring it unconstitutional to execute persons with mental retardation and those who committed crimes as juveniles (under the age of 18). The court has also ruled that defendants are entitled to have a jury decide whether to impose the death penalty.
- Twelve states do not allow the use of the death penalty. Five additional states have not executed anyone since its reinstatement in 1976. Other states are actively considering the abolition of the death penalty including New Mexico and Connecticut.

Additional information in support of these facts can be found at [www.ccdp.org](http://www.ccdp.org).

## 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. It also acknowledges 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 life is a gift from God that we must respect and protect. As it is applied to the death penalty, this teaching is both complicated and clear. The Church has long acknowledged the right of the state to use the death penalty in order to protect society. However, in recent years, Pope John Paul II, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Vatican's *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, and statements from bishops have more clearly insisted that the state should forgo this right if it has other means to protect society. Our fundamental respect for every human life and for God, who created each person in his image, requires that we choose not to end a human life in response to violent crimes if non-lethal options are available. Moreover, at a time when respect for the sanctity of human life is undermined in many ways, the Church's opposition to the use of the death penalty is an important witness in support of a culture of life.

In his encyclical *The Gospel of Life*, Pope John Paul II called us to choose to be “unconditionally pro life” (no. 28). During his last visit to the United States, he referenced the encyclical in a speech in St. Louis: “The new evangelization calls for followers of Christ who are unconditionally pro-life: who will proclaim, celebrate and serve the Gospel of life in every situation. A sign of hope is the increasing recognition 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.”

In response to Pope John Paul II's call to end the death penalty during his January 1999 visit, the bishops issued *A Good Friday Appeal to End the Death Penalty*. They reiterated his challenge to “end the death penalty, which is both cruel and unnecessary.” They concluded that their opposition to the death penalty is important not only for “what it does to those guilty of horrible crimes but for what it does to all of us as a society.”

Pope John Paul II and bishops from across the country have continued to appeal for an end to the use of the death penalty and have asked Catholics to join in a witness for life.

## What Catholics Are Thinking About the Death Penalty

**M**any Catholics have reconsidered their position on the death penalty. In past polls, Catholic support mirrored that of the American public at close to 70%. In a recent survey (Zogby International Poll for USCCB, December 2004), less than half (48%) of Catholics interviewed expressed support for the use of the death penalty.

A majority of Catholics credited Church teaching as the number one factor influencing their position on the death penalty. When asked, 54% indicated that it has an impact on their position. Catholics who attend Mass regularly are more likely to oppose the death penalty (56% opposed) than those who never attend Mass (26% opposed).

An overwhelming percentage of Catholics (79%) believe that opposition to the death penalty is “consistent with the defense of human life.”

### Church Teaching on the Use of the Death Penalty

- *The Gospel of Life*, Pope John Paul II, nos. 27 and 56.
- *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2267.
- *Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice*, pp. 32-34.
- *A Good Friday Appeal to End the Death Penalty*.

**T**he bishops of the United States have launched a “Catholic Campaign to End the Use of the Death Penalty.” To help Catholics take up this challenge, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops is developing a website with resources for use in parishes and dioceses, which include

- Resources explaining Catholic teaching on this issue
- Educational materials
- Papal statements
- Bishops’ and state conference statements
- Information on how to get involved in local, state or national efforts to end the use of the death penalty
- USCCB amicus briefs on execution of the mentally retarded and juveniles
- Examples of victims’ families who oppose the death penalty and innocent people who were on death row
- Brief video on Catholic social teaching and the use of the death penalty
- Liturgical, preaching, and other resources

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## What You Can Do

**A**s part of the “Catholic Campaign to End the Use of the Death Penalty” you can

**Pray** for victims of crime and their families, those who have been wrongly convicted, and those awaiting execution.

**Learn** about Catholic social teaching, criminal justice policies, and the policies in your state. Go to the website 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 website listed below for resources for classrooms and small faith communities, Vatican and bishops’ statements on the death penalty, and statements from individual bishops and state Catholic conferences.

**Advocate** by contacting your elected officials. Share with them Catholic teaching on the death penalty and urge them to take steps at the state and national level to curtail or end its use. To receive information on efforts regarding the death penalty at the national level or to link with a particular state’s efforts, visit the website listed below.

For a wide range of resources to help individuals, parishes and dioceses participate in the  
**“Catholic Campaign to End the Use of the Death Penalty”**

go to  
[www.usccb.org/death-penalty](http://www.usccb.org/death-penalty).



To purchase this resource or to obtain a catalog of other USCCB titles, call toll-free 800-235-8722. In the Washington metropolitan area or from outside the United States, call 202-722-8716. Visit the bishops’ Internet site at [www.usccb.org](http://www.usccb.org). Para pedidos en español, llame al 800-235-8722 y presione 4 para hablar con un representante del servicio al cliente en español.