



Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development Office of Domestic Social Development

DEATH PENALTY February 2011

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 seek justice, comfort and support victims and their families, while acknowledging the God-given dignity of every human life, even for those who do great harm. Catholic teaching on human life is rooted in the belief that all life has inherent dignity and is a gift from God that must be respected and defended from conception until natural death.

In his encyclical *The Gospel of Life*, Pope John Paul II 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).

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).

In 2005, the Catholic bishops of the United States issued, *A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death*. In the document the bishops stated that the gift of life must be respected and protected; “that every life is a precious gift from God (see Gn 2:7, 21-23) and that we are all created in God's image and redeemed by Jesus Christ, who himself was crucified. 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*)

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*

Facts About the Death Penalty

Support for the Death Penalty is Waning

Polling indicates waning support for use of the death penalty. In a 2005 Zogby poll, less than half of adult Catholics (48%) supported the use of the death penalty. This was a significant decrease from a previous 68%. Catholics cited “respect for life” as their primary reason for changing attitudes. With increasing data showing numbers of people being exonerated who were wrongly convicted and, with evidence that the application of the death penalty is replete with flaws, other sectors of society are also beginning to question the use of the death penalty.

Data shows the number of executions in the United States in 2010 has dropped by 12% compared with 2009, and by more than 50% since 1999. The number of new death sentences is the lowest in 34 years. More states are beginning to question the use of the death penalty. Even Texas, which has consistently led the nation in number of executions, experienced a 29% drop in executions in 2010. Recently, 61% percent of U.S. voters indicated support for alternative sentences to that of the death penalty. In 2009, New Mexico received world-wide public attention for abolishing the death penalty. In early January, 2011, the Illinois General Assembly voted to abolish the death penalty and now waits for

Governor Pat Quinn's signature to enact the legislation. And, before leaving office in early January, 2011, former Pennsylvania Governor Edward Rendell, called on the Pennsylvania legislature to study the application of the death penalty to determine whether it should continue to be supported. There are a various other proposals pending in state legislatures to reduce or end the use of the death penalty.

Who Is Affected?

Approximately 3,261 inmates are on death row in 37 state, military, and federal prisons. Since 1976, there have been 1,235 executions in the United States, including 46 in 2010. 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.

Lives in the Balance

The criminal justice system is run by human beings—and we make mistakes. Since 1973, at least 139 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*).

U.S. population, Race of Death Row Inmates

Black 42% Blacks constitute 12.9% of the U.S. population, but 42% of death row inmates

Hispanic 12%

White 44%

Other 2%

Source: *Death Penalty Information Center, 2011*

What You Can Do

- **Pray** for victims of crime and their families, those who have been wrongly convicted, and those awaiting execution. Taking life whether done by a perpetrator or by the state, diminishes and undermines the sanctity and dignity of human life. "We cannot teach that killing is wrong by killing. We cannot defend life by taking life."
- **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. This is especially important as most advocacy and activity related to the death penalty occurs at the state level.

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 www.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 United States. Go to www.catholicmobilizing.org for more information.