

What Catholics Should Know About the Death Penalty

Towards a Culture of Life

Our society tends, all too often, towards a culture of death. In a real sense our society's dysfunctions breed criminals through poverty, fatherlessness, discrimination, injustice, lack of opportunity and hopelessness. How much of the gang violence linked to the drug trade is occasioned by the addiction of the whole society to illegal drug use? Many of our social pathologies make us more prone to crime and violence.

We oppose the death penalty not just for what it does to those guilty of horrible crimes but for what it does to all of us as a **society**. Increasing reliance on the death penalty diminishes us and is a sign of growing disrespect for human life. We cannot overcome crime by simply executing criminals, nor can we restore the lives of the innocent by ending the lives of those convicted of their murders.

The death penalty offers the tragic illusion that we can defend life by taking life.

We urge all people of good will, particularly Catholics, to work to end capital punishment. At appropriate opportunities, we ask pastors to preach and teachers to teach about respect for all life and about the need to end the death penalty.

Jesus refused to stone the woman caught in adultery (Jn 8: 1-11), reminding us to be cautious in judging others and to have hope in the possibility of reform and redemption.

Scripture:

- Genesis 2:7, 21-23 – Every life is precious, a gift from God.
- Exodus 21:23-25 – “Eye for eye” meant to limit retribution, not to require a minimum punishment.
- Romans 12:17 – “Do not repay injury with injury.”

Some Facts:

- Blacks are 13% of U.S. population but 42% of death row inmates.
- Over 90% on death row could not afford their own attorney.
- Among Catholics only 48% support death penalty; churchgoers & younger Catholics are less likely to support it. *Zogby Int'l 2006 Poll.*²

Resources:

- Catholics Mobilizing Network to End the Use of the Death Penalty (CMN): www.catholicsmobilizing.org;
Contact: 202-541-5290.
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops:
www.usccb.org/deathpenalty
- Death Penalty Information Center (DPIC):
www.deathpenaltyinfo.org

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Notes

1. These texts are excerpted from “A Good Friday appeal to end the Death Penalty: A Statement of the Administrative Board of the U.S. Catholic Conference”, 1999.
 2. 2011 Gallup Poll on the Death Penalty
<http://www.gallup.com/poll/1606/death-penalty.aspx>.
 3. Zogby International Poll (Nov. 30, 2006).
<http://www.zogby.com/news/2006/11/30/le-moyne-collegezogby-international-poll-contemporary-catholic-trends/>.
 4. *Apostolic exhortation, Africae Munus* “Africa’s Commitment”, November 19, 2011.
www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_exhortations/
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A Good Friday Reflection



*to end
the use
of the
Death Penalty*



+ “On this Good Friday, a day when we recall our Savior’s own execution, we appeal to all people of good-will, and especially Catholics, to work to end the death penalty.

For more than thirty years, the Catholic bishops of the United States have called for an end to the death penalty in our land.”¹ The number of executions has declined each year in the past decade to 43 in 2011, a 56% decline since 1999 when there were 98. The 2011 Gallup Poll² recorded the lowest level of support in the U.S., and the highest level of opposition, in almost 40 years. Only 61% supported the death penalty, compared to 80% in 1994. Among Catholics a recent poll³ showed that only 48% of Catholics support the death penalty. Regular churchgoers and younger Catholics are less likely to support it, and a third of Catholics who once supported the death penalty now oppose it.

“We are encouraged by these new and growing signs that efforts to stop executions in our country, and around the world, are taking effect.”¹ Indeed, Popes Benedict XVI and John Paul II have called us and the worldwide community with new urgency to stand against capital punishment and to promote prison reforms and restorative justice.

Our Holy Father Benedict XVI

has made appeals to end the death penalty, notably to the Sant’Egidio Community on Nov. 30 and after the Synod in Benin on Nov. 19, 2011; excerpted below:



Art. 83. ...Rising crime rates in increasingly urban societies are a cause of great concern for all leaders and governments...Prisoners are human persons who, despite their crime, deserve to be treated with respect and dignity. They need our care. With this in mind, the Church must provide for pastoral care in prisons, for the material and spiritual welfare of the prisoners. This pastoral activity is a real service that the Church offers to society, and it is one that the state should support for the sake of the common good.

..... Together with the Synod members, 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. Pastoral workers have the task of studying and recommending **restorative justice** as a means and a process for promoting reconciliation, justice and peace, and the return of victims and offenders to the community.⁴

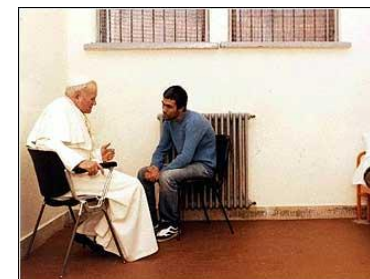
There is still much to be done:

- ◆ Join other Catholics in prayerful witness against executions.
- ◆ Learn/educate about the death penalty:
 - ◆ It is a pro-life issue – all life must be respected & protected, & allowed to reform;
 - ◆ It is inherently racist & biased towards the poor;
 - ◆ It is not a deterrent.
- ◆ Reach out to families of victims & inmates.
- ◆ Advocate for repeal of state death penalty laws.

“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. 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, MO., January 27, 1999



Pope John Paul II meeting with his would-be assassin, Mehmet Ali Ağca. At the pope’s request, Ağca was pardoned and returned to Turkey in 2000.



The Catholic Mobilizing Network to End the Use of the Death Penalty (CMN) seeks to promulgate the unconditionally pro-life teaching on the death penalty and to expand restorative justice programs in collaboration with the USCCB Pro-Life Office and the Office of Justice, Peace and Human Development. CMN works with state Catholic Conferences and in concert with other organizations around the country. ☞ In carrying out our mandate we develop resource materials, curricula and education programs (in English and Spanish) and provide teacher training, workshops and speakers. ☞ **Join Us** www.catholicmobilizing.org ☞ **Contact:** 202-541-5290