

OUR FAITH AND THE DEATH PENALTY

Respect for Life

Catholic teaching on human life is rooted in the belief that all life is a gift from God that must be respected and defended from conception to natural death.

Evangelium Vitae, Pope John Paul II's encyclical on human dignity, challenges us to be "unconditionally pro-life."

"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

"If...non-lethal means are sufficient to defend and protect people's safety from the aggressor, authority will limit itself to such means, as these are more in keeping with the concrete conditions of the common good and more in conformity to the dignity of the human person." (Article 2267)

Words of the Popes

Pope Francis: "Nowadays the death penalty is inadmissible, no matter how serious the crime committed. It is an offense against the inviolability of life and the dignity of the human person, which contradicts God's plan for man and society, and his merciful justice, and impedes the penalty from fulfilling any just objective. It does not bring justice to the victims, but rather fosters vengeance." *Written Letter*, March 20, 2015.

Pope Benedict XVI: "Society's leaders should 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." *Benin, Africa*, Nov. 19, 2011.

Pope John Paul II: Catholics and others believe that each human being is made in the image of God and therefore, "No matter how heinous the crime, the offender retains their God-given worth and must be treated with dignity." *St. Louis, Mo.*, Jan. 27, 1999.

Social Justice

The Church is also concerned with social injustices integrated in the death penalty system: "Its application is deeply flawed and can be irreversibly wrong, is prone to errors and is biased by factors such as race, the quality of legal representation, and where the crime was committed." *A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death* USCCB (2005).

Innocence

- Over 150 people have been exonerated from death row
- For every nine executions carried out in the United States, one person has been found to be innocent.

Racial Bias

- 76% of death row defendants have been executed for killing white victims, even though African-Americans make up about half of all homicide victims.
- African-Americans are overrepresented on death row. They make up 13% of the US population but constitute 42% of death row.

Criminalization of Mental Illness and Intellectual Disabilities

- A study in the *Hastings Law Journal* of recent executions found that "over half of the last one hundred executed offenders have been diagnosed with or displayed symptoms of mental illness."
- The Supreme Court banned the execution of those with intellectual disabilities but states have significantly deviated from accepted clinical methods for determining intellectual disability.

Representing the Poor

- The vast majority of individuals on death row could not afford their own attorney. In many cases, the appointed attorneys are overworked, underpaid, or lacking the trial experience required for death penalty cases.

Costly Public Policy

- The death penalty is more expensive than life without parole. Multiple studies have shown the cost of trial, sentencing, appeals, and imprisonment to be much higher in capital cases v. life in prison without parole.

Geographic Bias

- 2% of all US counties have produced 56% of the US death row population.
- Just three states, accounted for 80% of the executions in 2014.

Not a Deterrent

- The death penalty does not serve as a deterrent to violent crime. States without the death penalty have lower crime rates than states that do have it.