

death penalty

*"The death penalty neither deters others, nor brings this perpetrator to understanding, but instead, in the worst of ironies, publicly validates the very act of taking a human life."
~ Bishop Peter A. Libasci*

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 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 state 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

Although in the past our teaching allowed for capital punishment in rare instances, those rare instances are almost non-existent today in an age of maximum security facilities that protect our communities. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, informed by a heightened sense of the dignity of human life, rehabilitation, and mercy now holds that "the death penalty is inadmissible because it is

an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the human person" (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 Church's commitment to the dignity of human life extends to all stages and all conditions of human life, even to those convicted of the most serious crimes.

Papal Statements

Under the leadership and merciful example of Saint John Paul II, Catholic teaching on the death penalty was articulated and applied with even greater clarity and strength. The Holy Father challenged followers of Christ to be "unconditionally pro life" and reminded us that "the dignity of human life must never be taken away, even in the case of someone who has done great evil." *Evangelium Vitae (Gospel of Life)*, 1995. Pope Francis has urged abolition of the death penalty and said that capital punishment "is an offense to the inviolability of life and to the dignity of the human person which contradicts God's plan for man and for society and his merciful justice." *Letter to the President of the International Commission against the Death Penalty (March 20, 2015)*

death penalty facts

WHAT EVERY CATHOLIC SHOULD KNOW ABOUT CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

Innocence¹

Since 1973, over 160 people have been released from death row with evidence of their innocence. On average, innocent individuals have been incarcerated 11 years between their death sentence and exoneration. While DNA evidence has been valuable in helping some people prove their innocence, the fact that modern technology makes DNA evidence available will not prevent all wrongful convictions in the future as this evidence only exists in fewer than 15% of criminal cases.



Deterrence

After reviewing 30 years of studies, in a 2012 report, the National Research Council concluded that research does not support the claim that the death penalty has a deterrent effect and that studies that make such claims are "fundamentally flawed."² Consistent with this conclusion and reports in previous years, the 2016 FBI Uniform Crime Report showed that the southern United States, which accounts for 80% of executions, had the highest murder rate in the nation, while the Northeast, which accounts for less than 1% of executions, had the lowest murder rate. 88% of the former and present presidents of the country's top academic and criminological societies reject the notion that the death penalty acts as a deterrent to murder.³

Sources of Information

¹Death Penalty Information Center (DPIC) www.deathpenaltyinfo.org

²National Research Council, *Deterrence and the Death Penalty* (2012)

³Michael L. Radelet & Traci I. Lacock, *Do Executions Lower Homicide Rates?: The Views of Leading Criminologists*, Journal of Law & Criminology (2009)

⁴Peter A. Collins, Matthew J. Hickman, and Robert C. Boruchowitz, *An Analysis of the Economic Costs of Capital Punishment in Oklahoma* (2017)

⁵New Hampshire Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty, www.nodeathpenalty.org

Financial Costs

Studies have shown that the death penalty is more costly than alternative sentences. For example, a 2017 study revealed that Oklahoma death penalty cases cost on average 3.2 times more than non-capital cases.⁴ As of September 2013, the prosecution of New Hampshire's only death row inmate has cost \$2.3 million (compared with the average non-capital murder cost of \$50,000 to \$100,000), and the defense effort has cost \$2.6 million.⁵

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;" "wastes money" that "should be used for effective crime prevention measures and victim services;" and "does not serve victims' family members." (www.mvfh.org)