

Renewing Our Call to End the Death Penalty

Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration
A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice
USCC – December 2000

In these reflections, we bishops have focused on how our faith and teaching can offer a distinctive Catholic perspective on crime and punishment, responsibility and rehabilitation. These reflections do not focus on the death penalty as our primary concern. In this context, however, we wish to renew our call for an end to capital punishment.

The administration of the death penalty is often seen as a major sign of some of the failings within the American criminal justice system. Capital punishment is cruel, unnecessary, and arbitrary; it often has racial overtones; and it fails to live up to our deep conviction that all human life is sacred: “Our witness to respect for life shines most brightly when we demand respect for each and every human life, including the lives of those who fail to show that respect for others. The antidote to violence is love, not more violence.”²

In this call we add our voices to the prophetic witness of Pope John Paul II—who, when he last came to our nation, appealed for an end to capital punishment:

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 (cf. *Evangelium Vitae*, no. 27). I renew the appeal I made most recently at Christmas for a consensus to end the death penalty, which is both cruel and unnecessary.

We join our appeal to the position of the universal Church. The promulgated text of the Catechism of the Catholic Church declares,

If, however, 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 conformity with the dignity of the human person. (no. 2267)

And we join with those who are working to end the death penalty—in their witness at prisons as people are executed, in state capitals across our land, in courtrooms and prisons around the nation, and in Congress, where efforts to abolish or limit the death penalty are being debated. We support calls for a moratorium on executions and welcome the courage of leaders who have implemented or are working to address the clear failings of the death penalty.

We know this is not an easy matter. Catholic teaching has developed over time and there have been diverse views on the application of these principles. However, as we begin this new millennium, Pope John Paul II, the U.S. Catholic bishops, and the Catechism of the Catholic Church³ together express the strong conviction that capital punishment should no longer be used since there are better ways to protect society, and the death penalty diminishes respect for human life.

We are encouraged by small but growing signs that support for the death penalty is eroding and that capital punishment is being reconsidered. People are asking if we are really safer in states where executions are so regular that they hardly rate news coverage. People are asking whether we can be sure that those who are executed are truly guilty, given the evidence of wrongful convictions and poor representation in death penalty

cases. We welcome legislation to address these issues as a way to focus on the unfairness of the death penalty. But most of all, we are asking whether we can teach that killing is wrong by killing those who have been convicted of killing others. It is time to abandon the death penalty—not just because of what it does to those who are executed, but because of how it diminishes all of us.

We cannot overcome what Pope John Paul II called a “culture of death,” we cannot reverse what we have called a “culture of violence,” and we cannot build a “culture of life” by state-sanctioned killing. As we said before and renew today:

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. 4

We ask all Catholics—pastors, catechists, educators, and parishioners—to join us in rethinking this difficult issue and committing ourselves to pursuing justice without vengeance. With our Holy Father, we seek to build a society so committed to human life that it will not sanction the killing of any human person.

Notes

1. Though holding only one-half of 1 percent of death row inmates, the federal government recently concluded a study of its nineteen people on death row. The conclusion is that despite serious efforts to ensure fairness in seeking the death penalty for defendants convicted of federally eligible crimes, fourteen of the inmates are African American, five are Caucasian, and one is Hispanic (U.S. Department of Justice, *Survey of the Federal Death Penalty System: 1988-2000* [Washington, D.C., 2000]).
2. U.S. Catholic Bishops, *Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics* (Washington, D.C., 1998), 15.
3. For the complete text on the treatment of the death penalty, see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd. ed. (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000), nos. 2263-2267, see also, no. 32.
4. Administrative Board, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *A Good Friday Appeal to End the Death Penalty* (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1999) 3.